

In Varium Heliogabalum imperium conlatum est  
(HA/AH 1.4) : the Roman imperial succession of  
a.u.c. 971 = A.D.218

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# In Varium Heliogabalum imperium conlatum est (HA/AH 1.4): the Roman imperial succession of a.u.c. 971=A.D. 218

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

## Facts based on imperial artefacts.

At some point between the beginning of the year of Rome, *ab urbe condita* 971,<sup>1</sup> corresponding, by the Christian calendar, to *Anno Domini* 218, and summer of that year, the Roman empire underwent a change of master, its second in less than eighteen months. Marcus Opellius Macrinus, praetorian prefect under the Severan emperor commonly known as Caracalla, had, just over one year before, succeeded Caracalla. Assuming Caracalla's father's *cognomen*, Severus, he inserted it into his own official nomenclature, which thus became Marcus Opellius Severus Macrinus. Then, sometime early in 971=218, he was replaced as emperor by a mere boy, who assumed as his own Caracalla's official nomenclature: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

These are the principal facts that are known for certain, concerning this imperial succession, on the basis of coins and inscriptions. The evidence of these classes of artefacts, at least concerning matters of this sort — public circumstances or events, independently verifiable, by a random contemporary reader of the inscription, or a handler of the coin in question — is, in the context of these studies, usually regarded as sufficient to support propositions of fact, such as these, deriving therefrom.<sup>2</sup> The evidence follows:

Macrinus' coinage records his tenure of the tribunician power, during the first year of his reign, 970=217, and its renewal either from the 10<sup>th</sup> of December of that year, or the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of the next;

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- 1 The Roman calendar *ab urbe condita*, counting from the mythical date of the foundation of Rome, is used in this and related studies, in line with their underlying purpose, which is radically to reconsider the way the emperor who constitutes their central subject is viewed. Since he had no reliably recorded interaction with Christianity, to date him by its calendar, though convenient from a certain perspective, is, strictly speaking, inappropriate, if not irrelevant. Therefore in these studies, Roman dates a.u.c. are given first, followed, for ease of comprehension, by their Christian equivalents.
  - 2 For a full theoretical discussion of the epistemological and methodological principles underlying this study, and the whole of *Studia Variana*, see Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature, a Basis for Studia Variana*, part I: *The Boy on the Coin*, *Area Studies Tsukuba*, 22, 2004, (henceforth *QVI*).

likewise his tenure of the consulship, renewed from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 971=218.<sup>3</sup> An inscription records his partner in that consulship as Marcus Oclatinus Adventus.<sup>4</sup>



Coin of Rome depicting Macrinus.<sup>5</sup>

The association with Macrinus of his son, Diadumenianus, first as Caesar, or heir apparent, then, briefly, as co-Augustus, is recorded on coins depicting a very young boy.<sup>6</sup> A papyrus and an ostrakon from the first semester of 971=218 attest to Diadumenianus' short-lived status as Augustus, as does a denarius recently surfaced on the coin market.<sup>7</sup>



Coin of Nikopolis ad Istrum, Moesia Inferior, depicting Diadumenianus as Caesar.<sup>8</sup>

At some point during that semester, Macrinus' coinage ceases, together with that of his son, and that of this new Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (the third Roman emperor to bear that name) begins. He is the emperor commonly, but erroneously, known as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. For reasons fully explained elsewhere in these studies, here he is called Varius.<sup>9</sup>

3 *Cohen*<sup>2</sup>, 4, 290-310; Hammond, M., *The tribunician day during the early empire*, *MAAR*, 15, 1938, p. 57; Mattingly, H., *The Reign of Macrinus, Papers Presented to Professor David Moore Robinson*, ed. Mylonas, George E., & Raymond, Doris, 1953; Salama, P., *L'Empereur Macrinus Parthicus Maximus*, *REA*, 66, 1964, p. 334-352, esp. p. 343-345.

4 *CIL*, 6, 367, 14 March, 971=218; Pflaum, H.G., *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres Sous le Haut-Empire Romain*, 1960, (henceforth *Carrières*), 1, 247, *M. Oclatinus Adventus*, p.662-667.

5 Forum Ancient Coins, 7672. Silver denarius, RIC 35, RSC 87, BMC 54, 3.25g, 21.0mm, 18 Rome mint, December 217 A.D.; obverse IMP C M OPEL SEV MACRINVS AVG, laureate cuirassed bust right; reverse PONTIF MAX TR P II COS II P P, Securitas standing left, legs crossed, holding scepter and leaning on column.

6 As Caesar: *RIC*, 4.2, pl. II, nr.1. As Augustus: *BMCRE*, 5, p. 511, nr. 95, pl. 81.4.

7 Papyrus: *Lond. Pap.* II, 93, nr. 351; Ostrakon: *Pap. Leipz.* I (1906) 217 nr. 79; Petrikovits, H.v., *Opellius Diadumenianus*, *RE*, 17/35, 1939, col. 539-558, esp. col. 540, lines 24-28; Denarius: Lanz/Munich, Auct. 92 (1999), 899, with detailed commentary, mentioning further pieces.

8 Forum Ancient Coins, 7676. Bronze AE 28, Moushmov -, BMC -, Lindgren -, AMNG -, SNG Cop -, S -, 11.34g, 28.1mm, 0°, Nikopolis ad Istrum mint, obverse Μ ΟΠΕΛ ΔΙΑΔΟΥΜΕΝΙΑΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ, draped and cuirassed bust right; reverse ΥΠ ΣΤΑ ΛΟΝΓΙΝΟΥ ΝΙΚΟΠΟΛΙΤΩΝ ΠΡΟΣΙΣ, Serapis, turreted, standing left, holding branch in right and and transverse scepter in left; magistrate Statius Longinus.

9 Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature, a Basis for Studia Variana*, part II: *Nomen Varianum*, *Area Studies Tsukuba*, 23, 2004, (henceforth *QV2*).



Coin of Antioch depicting Varius, dated to 971=218.<sup>10</sup>

Varius is also depicted as a boy, although, to judge by the bust on those of his earliest coins, probably struck at Antioch, arguably showing his true likeness, one somewhat older than Diadumenianus.<sup>11</sup> Coins struck at Rome record, for Varius, the tribunician power and the consulship, both unnumbered, as is proper for a first tenure of each,<sup>12</sup> while an inscription identifies Marcus Oclatinus Adventus as his partner in the latter office;<sup>13</sup> just as if Varius, rather than Macrinus, had assumed both offices, on the cited dates, with, in the case of the consulate, the very same partner, and Macrinus had never existed. An inscription of the *Fratres Arvales* in Rome, dated in mid-summer of 971=218, records the adlection of Varius, designated Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, as a member of that religious confraternity.<sup>14</sup>

The foregoing evidence of coins and inscriptions shows that an imperial succession took place, at the time, between the persons, in the relative roles and order cited. If the scope of one's interest in this succession is limited to provable fact, this study may as well end here.

### **Certainty, possibility and likelihood: truth and verisimilitude.**

If, however, with respect to this matter, or indeed to any other, concerning the reign of Varius, one wishes to seek any further, and learn any more, one must venture outside the safe, but narrow citadel of certainty, into the surrounding broad, but perilous realm of possibility. In practice, this usually, but not always, means that one must move from examining coins and inscriptions, and other imperial or private artefacts, directly surviving from antiquity, to perusing texts of ancient historiography, transmitted by the manuscript tradition.

10 *Monnayage*, nr. 357; *BNF, Élagabale*, nr. 1226; probably struck at Antioch in 971=218.

11 *Monnayage*, nrs. 357, 364; *ibid.*, p. 10, *Le monnayage à Rome, A. Juillet-218 – début 218*; p. 14, *Les ateliers orientaux*.

12 *Monnayage*, nrs. 1-14.

13 *CIL*, 6, 131, 13 August, 971=218; *Carrières*, 1, 247, *M. Oclatinus Adventus*, p.662-667.

14 *CIL*, 6, 2104; *Acta Fratrum Arvalium*, ed. Scheid, J., *Roma Antica*, 4, *Recherches Archéologiques a la Magliana, Comentarjii Fratrum Arvalium qui supersunt*, 1998; *Acta Fratrum Arvalium Quae Supersunt*, ed. Henzen, 1874. Further to the note on calendars, above, it may be noted that the Arvales, a very ancient institution within the Roman political and religious establishment, use the a.u.c. calendar, as opposed to dating by consular years, the more common practice. It is on the basis of this precedent, set by the Arvales, that I have decided to use the a.u.c. calendar here.

This is a condition imposed by the relative lack of evidence from most surviving imperial or private artefacts for answers to the sorts of questions one may wish to ask. These include queries such as: Who, apart from the emperors themselves, were involved in this succession? What kind of succession was it? When, within the first semester of 971=218, did it take place? Where did it do so? How, in practice, was it brought about? Why did it occur?

Coins and inscriptions tend, as above, to provide evidence for broad propositions of fact, concerning circumstances and events, or their outcomes; but say little or nothing about the motivations, intentions, and procedures, or reactions, consequences, and interpretations, which lead to, or derive therefrom. The implication that one must venture beyond the borders of certainty, should one seek, perusing ancient historiography, to bypass this limitation, is dictated by the method of enquiry here espoused. It limits the use, as evidence, of texts of ancient historiography — which does address those sorts of questions — ordaining that, in the context of these studies, no proposition of fact may be based on allegations made by such texts alone.

If, therefore, one has recourse to ancient historiography, in seeking answers to those sorts of questions, one does so knowing that the answers one may find will not, at least not here, be considered as facts. So if, in seeking further enlightenment, one must renounce, not so much the pursuit of fact, as the expectation of ever finding it, what, then, may one hope to find, on the basis of the materials available, given the methodology espoused?

Likelihood is the most that one is liable to find, in varying degrees. If this is so, then, just as the criterion for determining fact is the truth, falsehood, or unverifiability of propositions based on evidence, the criterion for the qualification and quantification of likelihood — the most that can be done where evidence is absent — is the absolute, common or relative verisimilitude of propositions based on allegations or hypotheses.

It is, therefore, the intention of this study to venture forth into the realm of possibility, seeking to discern and identify those of its several varieties that one may encounter (which are indeed as many as there are different sorts of propositions). It will measure the degrees of likelihood of propositions, deriving from examination of materials, including not only coins and inscriptions, together with other surviving artefacts, but also texts of ancient historiography, relevant to the matter here in question: the imperial succession of 971=218. Viewing that succession through the prism of the methodology espoused here will provide a model and guide for subsequent investigation of the reign inaugurated by this succession.

#### **A likely hypothesis based on fact, based in turn on imperial artefacts alone.**

Our first step in venturing beyond the realm of certainty, into that of likelihood, will not, however,

lead us immediately down the enticing, but often bewildering paths of ancient historiography. Rather, in order to test our methodological tools in less than such challenging conditions, as well as to get our bearings in the realm of possibility, we shall first consider a case of likelihood, rather than certainty, deriving from an hypothesis seeking to interpret fact, established, in turn, by observation of the evidence of imperial artefacts alone. Only tangentially shall we, for now, draw on allegations from ancient historiography.

Coins and inscriptions establish that an imperial succession took place, at a certain time, involving, in the stated roles and order, the persons named by the cited coins and inscriptions. The latter class of artefacts, as well as papyri, also provide evidence of deliberate obliteration of Macrinus' name, together with that of Diadumenianus.<sup>15</sup> This observation of fact calls forth an hypothesis seeking to interpret and explain that fact, together with its attendant circumstances.

The discussion of likelihood requires its own rhetoric. Here, as elsewhere in these studies, in moving from description of facts to consideration of hypotheses, we move also from the past definite into the present historic. This, in the absence of *oratio obliqua*, is the most effective device of which the English language is capable, in order to distance myself, the author of the present text, not only from allegations made by authors of other texts, such as those, of ancient historiography, which we shall presently consider (where qualifying adverbs such as *allegedly*, *reportedly*, etc., will be employed, by way of reinforcement) but also from that conveniently expendable, easily renewable alter-ego, *one*, whom I now send out in my stead, to tread the minefields of the realm of possibility. I shall, however, take responsibility, in the first person singular, for those opinions which I wish to put forward with conviction.

One may, therefore, returning to one's observation of the obliteration of Macrinus' and Diadumenianus' names from their inscriptions, plausibly suppose that these are subject to *damnatio memoriae*, a fate often inflicted on the monuments of emperors deposed by force.<sup>16</sup> The end of Macrinus' and his son's joint reign, moreover, presumably implies that of their lives, since there is no known precedent, at this point in Roman history, for provision for the orderly retirement, and safe return to private life, of ex-Roman emperors. It should, however, be pointed out that this presumption is based entirely on allegations in ancient historiography,<sup>17</sup> uncorroborated by material artefacts, and on the

15 E.g. *CIL*, 3, 3714, 3720, 3724, 3725, 3726, 5728, 14354<sup>3</sup>; Salama, P, *L'Empereur Macrinus Parthicus Maximus*, *REA*, 66, 1964, p. 334-352; Sijpesteijn, P.J. *Macrinus' damnatio memoriae und die Papyri*, *ZPE* 13.3, 1974, p. 219-227.

16 Brassloff, *Damnatio Memoriae*, *RE*, 4/8, 1901, cols. 2059-2062, gives a purely juridical account. Sijpesteijn, op. cit., cites numerous examples in his notes, and uses the concept of *abolitio memoriae*, which he derives from Vittinghoff, F., *Der Staatsfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit, Untersuchungen zur "damnatio memoriae"*, *NDF/AAG*, 2, 1936.

17 Too numerous, and well known, to permit or require full citation, but e.g.: Tacitus and Suetonius, on Caligula, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian; Dio and Herodian, on Commodus, Pertinax, Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, and, of course, Caracalla, Macrinus, and Varius; Herodian, on Severus Alexander, Maximinus Thrax, the first two Gordians, Balbinus and Pupienus.

negative evidence provided by the absence of information to the contrary, therefore potentially forming a weak link in the present chain of argument. That weakness is somewhat mitigated by the virtual unanimity, in cases such as this, of such allegations, amounting to the general proposition that in ancient Rome, at least until the late exceptions of Diocletian and Romulus Augustulus, an emperor deposed is an emperor dead. In any case, this presumption is not central, but merely tangential, to the argument conducted at this point: the next proposition, a deduction, rests on direct observation of epigraphic nomenclatorial obliteration alone, albeit conjoined with the supposition of *damnatio memoriae*, and does not require this presumption; which, therefore, is not so much a link, as a pendant.

The next proposition seems logically to follow from an original observation of fact, leading to a supposition, with the optional input of a presumption (as we shall call, respectively, each of the foregoing steps in the present argument, in order to distinguish them). It may be called a deduction, proposing that the transmission of imperial power from Macrinus to this boy, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, was not a legally sanctioned, orderly and peaceful one, foreseen and instituted by Macrinus, and dutifully undertaken by his appointed successor, but rather the product of a sudden, unforeseen, and most likely violent revolution in the state. This proposition, cannot, however, be affirmed as fact, for the following reasons:

First, and most obvious, is that it states a deduction, arrived at through argument, rather than describing the direct observation of evidence of fact. There is no known coin or inscription, let alone any greater monument, such as those of Augustus, Trajan, or Severus, listing the names of defeated tribes and nations, specifically celebrating Varius' triumph over Macrinus; which, by the rules of evidence operating here, would allow us to affirm such a triumph as fact. There are coins, on the basis of interpretation of whose types, depicting or alluding to *Victoria*, but omitting mention of the direct object of the verb implied by that noun (victory over whom?), it is possible, indirectly, and even plausibly, to argue that Varius may have had them minted in order to celebrate that triumph, and perhaps to distribute among its artificers;<sup>18</sup> but such argument and interpretation, however plausible, may not here be counted as evidence of fact.

Secondly, the deduction here in question involves a supposition; albeit one resting indirectly on fact, but not stemming directly from fact itself. The fact, in this case, is the observable obliteration of Macrinus' inscriptions. The supposition here is that of the operation, in this case, of *damnatio memoriae*, which seeks to explain that fact. The deduction here in question, stated as the proposition that his successor overthrew Macrinus by force, involves the supposition of *damnatio memoriae*, which, despite its high degree of likelihood, is still a supposition, not a fact. We have no direct evidence, cast

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18 *Monnayage*, nrs. 55-65 & 86-89, *Victor Antonini Aug*; 66, *Victoria Antonini Aug*; 139 & 315-319, *Victoria Aug*. Also, arguably, coins from Sidon with the reverse legend *LEG III GAL*, cited in Ritterling, *Legio*, RE 12/24, 1925: XXXIII, *leg. III Gallica*, col. 1517-1532, esp. col. 1527, lines 34-39, referring to the legion which may have been responsible for his initial proclamation as emperor.

in metal, incised on stone, or recorded on parchment or papyrus, of any decree of the senate, such as that presumably required to institute such *damnatio memoriae*. All we have is its apparent result: the obliteration of Macrinus' name from inscriptions; which, admittedly, is unlikely to derive from any other cause. But the unlikelihood of an alternative is nevertheless not enough to raise this supposition to the status of fact. Some other cause, however unlikely, could, just conceivably, be found. (In using the word "cause" here, I am not invoking any deterministic, mechanistic, or other such theory of historical inevitability. Its specific meaning in the context of these studies is defined below.)

Another objection to considering this proposition as fact, is that the presumption here invoked in its support, holding that Macrinus' overthrow involved his death, together with that of his son, itself depends on extrapolation from a general rule to a particular case, ignoring the possible existence of exceptions. That rule, in this case, is a proposition, stated above as "an emperor deposed is an emperor dead," based, not on imperial artefacts, but on extrapolation from antique historiography, suggesting that, with only two exceptions, both much later than the period relevant here, no Roman emperor ever survived his tenure of that office. But, just as in the case of Varius' presumed victory over Macrinus, we have no direct, specific evidence of Macrinus' and his son's deaths at the hands of Varius, or of his agents: no triumphal arch, on which it is proclaimed, no coin, nor even an epitaph, which might lead one to suppose it.

The deduction that Macrinus was overthrown, together with his son, in a violent revolution of the state, leading to their succession by Varius, must, therefore, be characterised, according to the epistemology espoused here, not as a fact, but as an hypothesis, albeit one enjoying the highest degree of likelihood granted to hypotheses. The reason for granting it this status is threefold: its proximity to fact; the force of analogous example; and the absence of alternatives. This hypothesis directly concerns one fact: that of an imperial succession; and results from an attempt at explanation of another: that of the obliteration of a preceding emperor's name from his inscriptions; whilst seeking to link the one to the other. It does so, moreover, in the light of numerous examples, throughout Roman history, linking facts similar to these, in precisely this way, with hypotheses like this. Finally, it has no rivals: no alternative hypothesis is advanced, with regard to this particular imperial succession.

### **Widening the scope to ancient historiography: its relationship with the cited hypothesis.**

The foregoing example demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of argument from imperial artefacts alone. While only on the basis of such artefacts, and then only with respect to certain sorts of circumstances and events, may propositions of fact be framed here at all, the kinds of facts resulting therefrom tend to be simple, featureless, lacking in detail and depth. For further explanation of motive or cause, or description of process, one must turn to ancient historiography. This, however, is a source of information full of potential snares and pitfalls, rarely avoided by most previous writers on Varius. For this reason, among others, its use is subject here to stringent epistemological restrictions.<sup>19</sup>



For antique historians differ crucially from the issuers and artificers of imperial artefacts (including not only coins and inscriptions on stone, but also diplomas on bronze, as well as rescripts, edicts, or letters, preserved on papyrus, together with some portrait sculpture). Those historians with whom we have to deal here do not seem to feel bound to produce an accurate description of personal likeness or character. They do not address a specific question, sticking to the point. Nor do they render an objective, factual account of events and circumstances, which may be subject to critical scrutiny by any random contemporary, familiar with the relevant visage, character, question, event, or circumstance.

Rather, the particular historians whose texts we shall examine here seem to consider their principal duty to be that of accusation, execration, and the ventilation of righteous indignation, designed more to persuade one of the vehement orthodoxy of their own opinions of Varius, than to inform one objectively of facts about him. When they are not engaged in this particular pursuit, they tend to direct their efforts towards facile entertainment, achieved, so they seem to believe, with descriptions of spectacular, extravagant behaviour, preferably involving great expense, as well as with salacious anecdotes, concerning his alleged sexual behaviour. In view of these characteristics, and of several others, discussed elsewhere in these studies, the word of ancient historiography on any subject whatsoever, related to Varius, may never, at least not in their context, be taken, on its own, as sufficient to substantiate any proposition of fact.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this stricture, when one goes, as one must, to ancient historiography, in search of answers, however epistemologically circumscribed, to the sorts of questions that are left unanswered by coins and inscriptions, one notes that, in this case, ancient historiography does at least bear out the cited hypothesis: that of a violent revolution in the state, leading to an imperial succession. Cassius Dio Cocceianus (henceforth Dio), a Roman senator from Asia Minor, contemporary with the relevant persons, circumstances and events, writing in Greek less than a decade thereafter,<sup>21</sup> as well as the younger, less socially exalted Herodian, also writing in Greek, several years, or even decades, later than Dio, but still within range of living memory,<sup>22</sup> both provide accounts of the overthrow and death of Macrinus in a military *coup d'état*, wrought in favour of Varius.<sup>23</sup> Dio, moreover, reports the senate's condemnation of Macrinus, once Varius' victory is known;<sup>24</sup> the same senate having, allegedly, previously condemned Varius, when first apprised, in a letter from Macrinus, sent from Syria to Rome, of the insurrection

19 See the discussion of the uncritical use of ancient historiography by most writers on Varius in *QVI*.

20 The reasons for this stricture are fully discussed in *QVI*.

21 *Dio = Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, ed. Boissvain, Weidmann, 1901; ed. Cary, Loeb, 1969: books 79-80. Chapter numbers follow Boissvain's. Quotations in English are from Cary's translation.

22 *Herodian = Herodiani Historiarum Ab Excessu Divi Marci Libri Octo*, ed. Stavenhagen, Teubner, 1922; ed. Whittaker, Loeb, 1970: book 5. Quotations in English are from Whittaker's translation, with some alternative readings.

23 *Dio*, 79.30.2 – 79.40.5; *Herodian*, 5.3.1- 5.4.12.

24 *Dio*, 80.2.6.

undertaken in that province on his behalf.<sup>25</sup> The series of late antique Latin imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta* contains a number of *vitae* relevant to study of the reign of Varius,<sup>26</sup> or rather to that of its historiographical treatment in late antiquity, of which that dedicated to Macrinus provides an account of these alleged events;<sup>27</sup> but its chronological distance of at least more than one century therefrom, and possibly almost two,<sup>28</sup> plus its lack of any information, concerning this succession, not provided by Dio or Herodian, limit its value to the present discussion.

Although ancient historiography bears out the hypothesis, based on the evidence of coins and inscriptions, of a violent revolution in the state, this does not enhance the likelihood of that hypothesis. It already enjoys our highest degree of likelihood, which cannot be improved upon. Nor does such corroboration transform that hypothesis into fact. The generic stricture here espoused, against supporting propositions of fact with allegations from ancient historiography, precludes any such aid: the less reliable source cannot enhance the credibility of the more reliable. Rather, conversely, the coincidence between the testimonies of these two sources benefits the less reliable, helping the texts here in question to overcome some, at least, of their inherent handicap, according to the criteria here in operation, with respect to credibility.

So Dio and Herodian set out with at least one count in their favour: in alleging a *coup d'état*, they seem to be pointed in the right general direction, that of describing a violent revolution in the state. It is important, however, in considering these two accounts, roughly contemporary with the events and circumstances here in question, to keep in mind that neither author claims direct witness of those described (which may or may not coincide with those here in question). Indeed, Dio, whose account, though none too kind to Macrinus, is resolutely hostile to his successor, goes to some pains to tell us that he never met or interacted with that successor during his reign of less than four years, despite a brief period of geographical proximity, and that his account of him derives entirely from "reliable sources."<sup>29</sup> Herodian, who in most ways, though not all, is less detailed and punctilious than Dio, does not even bother to mention his sources for his account of this reign.

It should be noted that their accounts agree in broad outline. Both describe a *coup*, leading to Varius' succession, predicated on the conjunction of two separate sets of persons, each with their own motives and desires. On the one hand, a legion of disgruntled soldiers wish to overthrow Macrinus; on the other,

<sup>25</sup> Dio, 79.38.1.

<sup>26</sup> HA = *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, ed. Hohl, Samberger & Seyfarth, 1971; ed. Magie, Loeb, 1980: HA/AH = *Vita Antonini Heliogabali*; HA/SA = *Vita Severi Alexandri*; HA/OM = *Vita Opellii Macrini*; HA/Car = *Vita Caracallae*.

<sup>27</sup> HA/OM, 8.4 – 10.6.

<sup>28</sup> Chastagnol, A., *Le Problème de l'Histoire Auguste: état de la question*, BHAC, 1963; Schwartz, J., *Sur la date de l'Histoire Auguste*, BHAC, 1966/1967, p.91-99; Chastagnol, A., *Recherches sur l'Histoire Auguste, avec un rapport sur les progrès de la Historia Augusta Forschung depuis 1963*, BHAF, 6, 1970.

<sup>29</sup> Dio, 80.7.4. Millar, F., *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964 (henceforth SCD), p. 168, discusses Dio's sources.

a small but heterogeneous cabal of individuals, led by Varius' grandmother, Maesa, wish to put Varius on the throne. Yet more than coinciding, these two accounts complement each other: what is missing in the one is often found in the other. Specifically, Dio has more to say about the soldiers' motivations, in terms of their perceived self-interest; Herodian more about Maesa's, and her interaction with the soldiers, in view of the occasion provided by their pre-existing attitudes towards Varius, not all of which concern their perceived self-interest, in conceiving the *coup*. Dio has more to say about its execution. The only place where they contradict each other is with respect to a few seemingly important, but, in effect, hardly consequential details of that execution. Thus, together, with a few much lesser contributions, in terms of length and detail, from other, later texts, these two accounts form a narrative palimpsest concerning the succession of 971=218. It is set out, elsewhere in these studies, in tabular form, with concordances and variants clearly identified according to source.<sup>30</sup>

Given that, in order to delve beneath the shallow surface layer of facts and hypotheses, afforded by the evidence of imperial and private artefacts, one must have recourse to ancient historiography, examination of this palimpsest must constitute the next step in this enquiry. The method of investigation is dictated by the particular characteristics of the materials in question. That one is dealing with ancient historiography imposes, on top of the basic requirement of adopting a sceptical approach, on the one hand the need for textual exegesis and interpretation, on the other an awareness that, in the absence of comparison of texts with artefacts, the operative criterion is verisimilitude, rather than truth. The agreement, in broad outline, of the two principal accounts, allows one to follow their narratives together, chronologically, rather than each separately. The need to allow for their differences requires one to treat them comparatively. Their agreement as to the main constituent elements of the story dictates organising one's enquiry along the lines of demarcation of those elements: on the one hand the distinction between the two sets of people involved: the soldiers, and Maesa's cabal; on the other, the division of the story into two consecutive stages: conception and execution.

### **Identity and nomenclature of Macrinus' successor.**

The first act in exegesis and interpretation of this palimpsest must be to establish the unity of its subject matter, particularly with regard to the identity of the individual around whom the narrative revolves: the successor of Macrinus. For each of the ancient authors calls him by different names, implying different attitudes towards him. The identity and nomenclature of Macrinus' successor are questions that lie at the heart of this succession, and on which its outcome arguably depends. They are discussed in detail elsewhere in these studies,<sup>31</sup> so here a brief recapitulation will suffice.

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30 *Historiographica Variana*, belonging to the series called *Documenta*, rather than to the present series of *Quaestiones*, yet to be published.

31 *QV2*.

Macrinus' successor is identified, on his coins, as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. This, in the context of the times, implies him to be the son of Caracalla, and hence the grandson of Severus. That implication is explicitly claimed as fact in his inscriptions: *Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus Pius Felix, Divi Severi Pii nepos, Divi Antonini Pii Magni filius*: "the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, Pious and Fortunate, Grandson of the Deified Pious Severus, Son of the Deified Pious Antoninus the Great."<sup>32</sup>

Dio, however, asserts Macrinus' successor to be the son of Sextus Varius Marcellus, a Syro-Roman knight, later senator, married to Soaemias, the daughter of Maesa, who is the sister of Domna, herself the wife of Severus, and, by him, the mother of Caracalla. Sextus Varius Marcellus' death, some time before this succession, known from an inscription dedicated to his memory by his widow, Soaemias, together with her children,<sup>33</sup> renders it possible, without risk of contradiction, for her mother, Maesa, to claim, as she is alleged to both by Dio and Herodian, that her grandson, Soaemias' son, was conceived in adultery with Caracalla. While Herodian professes agnosticism, with respect to the question of Macrinus' successor's paternity,<sup>34</sup> Dio indignantly dismisses his claim to be the son of Caracalla, and, in consequence, his right to the name Antoninus. Instead, Dio calls him, throughout much of his narrative, *Pseudantoninus*, as well as by several other epithets and names. The least insulting of these is Avitus, the *cognomen* of this boy's maternal grandfather, husband of Maesa, and Dio's senatorial colleague.<sup>35</sup>

This differendum between, on the one hand, the claims of Caracallan paternity advanced by imperial artefacts, and, on the other, Dio's allegations to the contrary — which, in this case, I consider more likely to be true — provides a good example of why only certain propositions, specifically those concerning circumstances and events publicly verifiable by a random contemporary witness, may claim the status of fact on the basis of the evidence of imperial artefacts.<sup>36</sup> Let it not, however, be thought thereby that Dio's contradiction in any way affects the epistemological status of the claims made by those imperial artefacts. It is not because Dio contradicts them that they are inadmissible as evidence of fact, but because of their essential unverifiability. That Dio's account of this question happens to be more plausible than the claims of these imperial artefacts says nothing, moreover, of a generic nature, regarding the relative value, as evidence, of one class of materials, as compared to that of another. Its significance is strictly limited to

32 Inscriptions (e.g.): *CIL* 2, 4766, 4767 4805; *CIL* 3, 773, 6058, 6170,; *CIL* 6, 37183; *CIL* 8, 10308, etc., Coins: *Monnayage*, throughout. *Epigraphica* and *Numismatica Variana*, yet to be published, provide full catalogues of both these sources. *Divus Antoninus Pius Magnus* is the official posthumous nomenclature of the deified Caracalla.

33 *CIL*, 10, 6569 = *ILS*, 478; Pflaum, *Carrières*, 2, 237, *Sex. Varius Marcellus*, p.638-642; Klass, *Sextus Varius Marcellus*, *RE*<sup>2</sup> 8/15, 1955, col. 407-410; Rohden, Paul von, & Dessau, Hermann, *Sextus Varius Marcellus*, *PIR*<sup>1</sup>, 1898, pars 3, p. 386, item 192.

34 *Herodian*, 5.3.10.

35 *Dio*, 79.30.2 – 80.21.3, throughout. For a full list and discussion of all the names used for this boy by Dio, see *QV2*.

36 For a detailed discussion of this differendum, and of my reasons for preferring Dio's contradictory allegations to the claims of imperial artefacts, see *QVI* and *QV2*.

this particular case.

Herodian, for his part, at the beginning of his narrative, calls the successor of Macrinus, in his pre-imperial persona, Bassianus, a name also borne by Caracalla during his childhood. It is derived, so we deduce from the anonymous late antique Latin *Epitome de Caesaribus*,<sup>37</sup> from the father of Domna and Maesa, erstwhile high priest of the sun god, Elagabal, at Emesa, in Syria, an office this boy later occupies. Once this boy, claiming to be the son of Caracalla, becomes emperor, Herodian, unbound by Dio's scruples, calls him Antoninus.

The *Historia Augusta*, despite its scant relevance to study of this succession, is highly relevant to the question of Macrinus' successor's nomenclature, because it is arguably heir to a Latin nomenclatorial tradition, deriving from the lost text of Marius Maximus, another of Dio's contemporary senatorial colleagues.<sup>38</sup> Although, like Dio, it calls him by several other names, many of which are insulting, and one of which, Heliogabalus, a form of the name of the god he worships, is a malapropism, as applied to him, it also calls this boy Varius, the *nomen* of Sextus Varius Marcellus, without, however, alluding in any way to that Syro-Roman knight.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the many different names by which they call him, these diverse ancient historiographical sources unanimously identify this boy, whose mother is Soaemias, and grandmother Maesa, as Macrinus' successor. On this basis, the unity and continuity of his identity among these several texts is regarded as established. Given, however, his multiplicity of names, and the diverse attitudes and connotations implied by each of them, I have considered it necessary to choose the most appropriate among them, and have chosen Varius.

Now it might be objected that, in having recourse to ancient historiography, and in particular to such a dubious source, with respect to veracity, as the *Historia Augusta*, in making this choice, I have broken my own rule against arguing propositions of fact on the basis of ancient historiography. Yet what I have argued is not a proposition of fact, but of likelihood. Names, moreover, are not, in themselves, propositions of fact, though their use may imply such propositions, whether truthfully or not (as in the case of the use of the name *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* by this boy). Ancient historiography does, in any case, constitute evidence, sufficient in itself, for one to say that someone is called by a given name, simply by virtue of calling that person so: for people are called whatever they are called, and calling them so renders them so called, whether appropriately or not. All this being understood, it is not, in any case, on ancient historiography that my choice of what I think to be the most appropriate among the possible names for this boy is based, but rather on the fact that his mother's husband's *nomen* is Varius,

37 *Incerti auctoris Epitome de Caesaribus*, Ed. Pichlmayr & Gruendel, 1970, p.157, §23.

38 Syme, Ronald, *More about Marius Maximus*, in *Emperors and Biography*, 1971; Birley, A.R., *Marius Maximus, the consular biographer*, ANRW 2.34.3, 1997.

39 *HA/AH* 1.1; 1.6; 2.1; 2.2; 9.2; 10.1; 14.2; 14.5.

as attested in the inscription, cited above, dedicated by her, together with her children, to his memory. Whether Sextus Varius Marcellus is this boy's biological father or not, that fact alone would suffice, in accordance with Roman law and custom, for him to be called Varius.<sup>40</sup>

### **Methodological guidelines for discussing the likelihood of ancient historiographical accounts of the succession of 971=218.**

We have determined, above, that given the characteristics of the narrative palimpsest constituted by the two main ancient historiographical accounts of this succession, together with a few brief contributions from other, later texts, it is possible to examine that palimpsest, not only sceptically, but exegetically, interpretatively, chronologically, and comparatively, following the categorical outlines of their constitutive elements offered by the texts themselves. It has, moreover, been observed, that, in the absence of comparison of texts with artefacts, the operative criterion, in such examination, is verisimilitude, rather than truth. Here, therefore, I shall focus on the question of the likelihood of their respective allegations. Before doing so, however, certain preliminary observations are in order, laying a methodological framework for such consideration. These build on the foundation of what we have discovered so far, with respect to certainty and likelihood.

As we have seen, in examining, at the beginning of this study, particular coins and inscriptions, the outcome of this succession is not in doubt. Indeed it constitutes a fact, one of the few which can be ascertained in the context of these studies: Varius succeeded Macrinus. We have also examined an hypothesis, seeking to explain another, seemingly closely related fact: that of the obliteration of Macrinus' name from his inscriptions. This hypothesis, proposing a violent revolution in the state, involving the deaths of Macrinus and his son, and their *damnatio memoriae*, whilst remaining an hypothesis, enjoys the highest degree of likelihood. This means that in practice one treats it as if it were a fact, whilst keeping in mind a tacit reservation, only to be stated should one be challenged by an adversarially minded historian or philosopher, or surprised by a totally unforeseen turn of events, such as the discovery, by an archaeologist, of new evidence, overturning it.

The question remaining here to be discussed, that of likelihood, therefore applies, in the case of this succession, not to its outcome, which is a fact, nor even to the hypothesis that its nature is sudden, unforeseen, violent, and, moreover, vindictive, which is treated as a fact. Both these propositions, let us remember, derive from coins and inscriptions. Rather, what remain to be examined, with respect to likelihood, are accounts of its conception and execution, all of which come from ancient historiography. Given the plurality of accounts, and their chronological and epistemological relationship, both to the

40 Regarding this conclusion, advanced in *QV2*, I have received the following comment from A.R. Birley: "For what it's worth I would imagine "Elagabalus" name before he became M. Aurelius Antoninus was Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus (or Bassianus Avitus). See e.g. O. Salomies, *Die römischen Vornamen* (1987) for the virtually universal practice from the 2nd century AD of Roman sons taking the same *praenomen* as their father."

events they allege, and to each other, the likelihood of any proposition stemming from them must be assessed at one or more of three levels, as relevant: individual, common or relative. Before undertaking this exegesis, interpretation, and assessment of likelihood, let us briefly recapitulate what we have already learned, concerning likelihood as such, and develop certain aspects of those lessons more fully.

We have already found that the two extant accounts of this succession by contemporary writers, those of Dio and Herodian, in bearing out the hypothesis, derived from coins and inscriptions, characterising it as sudden and violent, benefit thereby, with regard to their presumptive likelihood. They both, moreover, benefit equally. In this respect, at least, there is no discernible difference between them. Indeed, they may be said to share a common likelihood. There are, however, limits to its value. It is not as high, in their case, as that of the cited hypothesis in its, because their cases are different.

This hypothesis, proposing a revolution in the state, enjoys the highest degree of likelihood because of its immediate proximity to fact, and of the force of numerous analogous examples, as well as of an absence of rivals. It is, moreover, framed at a fairly high level of generality. It proposes that this imperial succession is not planned by the outgoing emperor, nor carried out peacefully, indeed perfunctorily, by the incoming one, but rather that it is sudden, unforeseen, and violent. That characterisation, consisting of three linked propositions, while less general, or more specific, than one consisting only of two, or of one, nevertheless leaves a great deal of room for further particularity. It could cover anything ranging from the poisoning of an ailing emperor by his heir apparent,<sup>41</sup> through an emperor's secret assassination, and immediate substitution in a palace intrigue,<sup>42</sup> or a *coup d'état*, such as that alleged here, involving a relatively limited degree and scope of military action,<sup>43</sup> to a full scale civil war, fought for years, across broad swathes of the empire's territory, involving many legions of soldiers.<sup>44</sup>

Dio's and Herodian's accounts of this succession may not here be counted as evidence for its occurrence. Nor do they cite other evidence for it as such, in the form of coins and inscriptions. Therefore their accounts do not stand immediately next to that succession, considered as a fact. This does not mean that Dio or Herodian may not, as individuals, have lived through that succession, knowing it to be a fact. Rather, perhaps precisely for that reason, they did not, in writing their accounts of it, consider it necessary to prove its existence to their readers, and, therefore, did not take the trouble to cite any evidence of its occurrence. A consequence of this omission, when viewed from the perspective of the modern study of ancient history, is that their accounts, unlike an hypothesis derived from examination of coins and inscriptions establishing the fact of that succession, stand farther from that fact than does such an hypothesis. Moreover, in describing this succession as taking the form of a *coup d'état*,

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41 Alleged by *Dio* 72.33.4<sup>2</sup>, in the succession of Marcus Aurelius by Commodus.

42 Alleged by *Dio* 73.22.2-6, in the succession of Commodus by Pertinax.

43 Alleged by *Dio* 74.9.2-10.3, in the succession of Pertinax by Didius Julianus, as well as in that of Macrinus by Varius.

44 Alleged by *Dio* 75.6 – 76.6, in the aftermath of the succession of Didius Julianus by Severus, the civil war in question being fought in two separate theatres, against Niger and Albinus respectively.

therefore choosing this, rather than any alternative, they move beyond the generality of that hypothesis, towards greater specificity. The benefit, however, to their credibility, derived from coincidence with that hypothesis, is limited to the extent to which they share its generality.

In order to address the question springing immediately to mind, that of the likelihood, common both to Dio's and Herodian's accounts, with regard to their characterisation of this succession as occurring through a *coup d'état*, we would have to consider the alternatives. None, however, are forthcoming, from any source whatever. The murder of an emperor by his heir is ruled out categorically, by confrontation of their protagonists' respective roles, in any such hypothetical alternative account, with the known identities of the historical individuals involved: Diadumenianus, not Varius, is the heir of Macrinus; yet Varius is Macrinus' successor. No ancient author, moreover, claims, in this case, a secret assassination, or an extensive civil war; nor does any extant artefact, imperial or private, suggest any such thing. So, in the absence of any specifics on which to base a comparison between, on the one hand, Dio's and Herodian's accounts, and, on the other, any possible alternative, it would have to be based on generalities. To dispense with it briefly, it may be said that, in the context of the times, to the extent that we may presume to understand them, no general underlying circumstances or conditions (terms presently to be considered) render any of the possible alternatives likelier than a *coup*.

That done, we may proceed to the question of whether and where any difference in likelihood between these two accounts may arise. Their enjoyment of the benefit derived from their coincidence with the cited hypothesis is equal. With respect to its specific assertion, that of the generic nature of the succession as sudden and violent, they share a common likelihood. So, if a difference in likelihood between them should emerge, it will do so with respect to questions concerning not the nature, but, on the one hand, the conception of the *coup*, or, on the other, the manner of its execution, or both. Let us, to begin with, consider only its conception.

In considering the conception of the *coup*, whose reality we shall, for the sake of argument, henceforth assume as given (thereby saving many utterances of "alleged" and "reported"), it is necessary first to define and distinguish among cause, occasion and motivation, whether as elements relating to conception, or to one another. Here, conception is that set of notions and calculations shaping a potential course of action in the minds of its potential performers. Cause is a set of conditions, preceding an event that has already occurred, given whose presence one believes that event was likely or certain to occur, and without whose presence one believes that event would not have occurred. (This is the definition promised above.) Occasion is a disposition of underlying circumstances or conditions, whether real or imaginary, rendering a given course of action conceivable. The perception of occasion may, in certain circumstances, perhaps involving motivation, lead to conception. Motivation is a series of notions, feelings and calculations, whether rational or not, possibly contributing to the conception, and leading to the intended or actual performance of a given course of action.



Among underlying conditions relevant here, possibly contributing to the occasion for a *coup*, may be counted the generic role of the military establishment in the Roman imperial body politic, especially in relation to the institution of the principate, and in particular to its modes of succession; all of which must be viewed in the context of the relevant period, as well as in that of Roman history as a whole. Another such condition, involving the same obligations in its consideration, is the generic role of the dynastic model in the principate, especially as it relates to the question of biological, as opposed to adoptive filiality, and, in particular, as it manifests itself in the cases of Antonines and Severans. The combination and interaction of both these sets of generic conditions, in the context of specific circumstances, those created by the death of Caracalla, and his succession by Macrinus, may constitute an occasion for the possible conception of a *coup*. Yet their presence, even in this specific combination, does not necessarily guarantee that *coup*'s conception, much less its execution. For all these circumstances and conditions are necessary for both, but not yet sufficient for either.

In order to create sufficient conditions for a *coup* to be conceived, then to be executed, motivation is required, whether individual or collective. In considering motivations for the *coup*, one must distinguish between the individual and collective motivations of its diverse participants, and, moreover, between those motivations which are real, and those which are merely ostensible. The combination of occasion with motivation, leading to conception and execution, may, according to certain theories of history, constitute a chain of cause and effect. The applicability of such a theory here may be questioned. Because our principal sources, Dio and Herodian, speak only of occasion and motivation, we shall begin there, leaving for later consideration of underlying causes, and of whether any theory of cause and effect is applicable here at all.

A last, preliminary distinction must be made, before we proceed to examine and compare Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the conception of the *coup*, with a view to the questions of their individual, common or relative likelihood. In discussing this succession we must not forget that it involves two distinct elements: the fall of Macrinus, and the rise of Varius. The former does not necessarily imply the latter, while the latter does necessarily involve the former. They are not, moreover, necessarily related, in terms of occasion and motivation. Indeed, as we shall see, a lack of original relationship is arguably the case in this instance. It may plausibly be described as a matter of chance that the occasions and motivations for the one, and those for the other, happen to meet, and lead to the conception of a concerted plan of action.

### **The motives of Dio and Herodian in writing their accounts.**

Leaving for later discussion of the execution of that plan, let us now proceed to examine, with particular attention to the question of occasion and motivation, the two main ancient historiographical accounts relevant to the conception of the *coup*. The first motivations with which we must contend, are those of the authors of the relevant narratives, principally Dio and Herodian; for theirs are the

prisms through which we, perforce, must view their accounts of these matters. While there are certain similarities between them, mainly that they both write in Greek, there is also a basic asymmetry between them, deriving from differences in their generation and social class. These may be summarised by saying that Dio is, or was when they occurred, an interested party, with respect to the circumstances and events that he describes, whereas Herodian does not seem to have been so.

Let us begin with what they have in common: they are both presumably Greek, at least by culture. Whereas Dio's text contains precise allegations concerning his origin, from a distinguished Greek family in Asia Minor, as well as his senatorial status, and *cursus honorum*, and there is even some documentary evidence for the latter,<sup>45</sup> there is no such precise allegation or evidence for Herodian's origin or status. Some scholars have claimed that he is an Asiatic Greek, others that he must be a Syrian; some have thought him to be a senator, an equestrian or an ordinary freeborn provincial, others the son of a freedman or a slave.<sup>46</sup> Culturally, at least, both he and Dio may be said to be Greek, but with a differing nuance. Due perhaps to his position as a Roman senator, Dio sometimes seems to wish to appear at least as Roman as, if not more Roman than the Romans, especially in his attitudes towards things such as "Asiatic luxury".<sup>47</sup> Herodian, in contrast, sometimes writes about things Roman as if explaining its curiosities to his Greek compatriots, though this may merely be a literary convention.<sup>48</sup>

Whether as a Greek from Asia Minor, or affecting Roman xenophobia, Dio manifests distaste for races farther East. His dislike is especially directed against Semitic influences, operative at various times during the history of the Roman empire. These are particularly evident under the dynasty instituted by Severus, an African who is arguably of Punic, ultimately Phoenician descent,<sup>49</sup> together with his wife, Domna, who is most likely what we would now call an Arab, though originating from that part of Syria the Romans call *Phoenice*.<sup>50</sup> Dio deplores Varius' alleged sumptuary behaviour, manifested in his reported preference for Syrian over Roman dress, as well as his supposedly barbaric religious practices.<sup>51</sup>

Herodian, in contrast, seems more curious than condemnatory with regard to Semitic dress and religion. Indeed with respect to the hieratic activities of Varius, who, at the same time as Roman emperor, is high priest of the cult of a Syrian sun god, Elagabal, Herodian offers us more detailed and dispassionate data than does Dio. And in commenting on Varius' priestly dress, Herodian does so with wonder rather

45 Millar, *SCD* Ch. 1, *The man and his career*, throughout, and esp. p. 24 n.1.

46 See Whittaker, C.R., *Introduction* to his translation of *Herodian's History*, Loeb Classical Library, 1969; also Alföldy, G., *Herodians Person, Die Krise des Römischen Reiches, Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbetrachtung, Ausgewählte Beiträge*, HABES, 5, 1989, p. 240-272, for a thorough discussion of this question.

47 Millar, *SCD*, p. 190-191; also: Bering-Staschewski, R., *Römische Zeitgeschichte bei Cassius Dio*, Bochum, 1981, esp. p. 114-134, *Das Geschichtsbild des Historikers Cassius Dio*.

48 Whittaker, C.R., *Introduction* to his translation of *Herodian's History*, p. xxviii-xxxi: *Herodian's audience*.

49 Birley, A.R., *Septimius Severus, the African Emperor*, 1971, p. 2-4: *Introduction*.

50 Millar, F., *The Roman Near East, 31BC-AD 337*, 1993 (henceforth *RNE*), p. 304.

51 *Dio*, 80.8.3, 80.11.

than contempt.<sup>52</sup>

This difference is most likely to derive from differences in generation and social class, dictating differences in the degree of their involvement with Varius, as well as with his predecessor and successor. While the lifetimes of both historians precede and surpass that of Varius, they do so at different stages of each of their respective lives. Dio is the elder, and already a fairly old man by the time Varius comes to the throne, surviving him by perhaps as much as a decade. Herodian is younger, and survives Varius by some decades, probably writing about him considerably later than does Dio.

Dio, by his own account, has, at various times in his life, interacted personally with Severus and Caracalla, and has been appointed to important offices, including, by Macrinus, the curatorship of Pergamon and Smyrna, just before the imperial succession of 971=218. His account of Varius, written, after that emperor's death in 975=222, during the remaining years of his own life, leads one to suspect that he felt politically and personally vulnerable during Varius' reign, during which he held the aforementioned curatorship, and is greatly relieved to have survived into that of Varius' cousin and successor, Severus Alexander.

Alexander's succession to Varius is, according to Dio's and Herodian's accounts,<sup>53</sup> though of a somewhat different category, not involving clashes between groups of soldiers, every bit as violent, with respect to the fate of the outgoing emperor, as that of Varius to Macrinus. It may also be said to involve *damnatio memoriae*, by an argument, based on epigraphy, analogous to that performed above, with respect to the previous succession.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, so we are told both by Dio and Herodian, the reign of Alexander sees the wholesale repudiation and repeal of all Varius' policies and measures.<sup>55</sup> If the tone and content of Dio's description of Varius are to be taken as evidence, (and whether or not this is so is a real, not a purely rhetorical question),<sup>56</sup> it encourages, or at least tolerates, the personal vilification of Varius among those close to Alexander. For Dio's career, despite his advanced age, achieves new heights under Alexander, whom at one point he joins in the consulship.<sup>57</sup> Dio is hardly, therefore, a disinterested party, in his attitude towards Varius.

In addition to this, as a member of the senatorial order, Dio has an ambivalent attitude towards the principate. On the one hand, in its military capacity, it is an ally, protecting senators, as well as populace, from barbarians without the frontiers, and repressing potential challenges from lower classes within. On the other, in its political role, it is an adversary, usurping senatorial prerogatives, passed down, largely in form rather than substance, from the time of the republic, frequently treating the senate with contempt,

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52 *Herodian*, 5.3.4-7; 5.5.3-10.

53 *Dio*, 80.20.1-2; *Herodian*, 5.8.8-9.

54 A list of Varian inscriptions showing evidence of obliteration will be published in *Epigraphica Variana*.

55 *Dio*, 80.21.2, 80 (LXXX) 2.2; *Herodian*, 6.1.1-3.

56 See the doubts I have expressed on this question in *QV2*, p. 4-5.

57 *Dio*, 80 (LXXX).5.1; Millar, *SCD*, p. 24, n.1.

when not with outright violence against its members. Of other classes within the empire which may challenge the senate's pre-eminence (after, of course, that of the principate) the most to be feared by a senator is that of the equestrians, who, in Dio's lifetime, are frequently raised to senatorial rank, thus diluting its prestige. Worse still is the threat that equestrians may achieve eminence in their own right, bypassing the senatorial order altogether. That threat is embodied by Macrinus, the first equestrian ever to pretend to, and acquire, the principate, without having first become a senator.

Herodian, in contrast, does not seem to have a vested interest in the sorts of reactionary political and social attitudes expressed by Dio, and does not share Dio's point of view with regard to equestrians. Describing the circumstances and events of this succession, and its sequel, from a greater distance, both socially and chronologically, he is at once less detailed and precise, but more apparently objective, less compromised. He seems more interested in the entertainment value of his narrative, than in its ideological or moral dimensions. His attitude sometimes, though not always, as shall presently be seen, appears rather simple, almost to the point of banality; whereas Dio's is complex, ambivalent almost to the point of self-contradiction, not so much with regard to matters of information, as to judgement and evaluation. His ambivalence towards Severus, manifest over several chapters of his *History*, is a case in point.<sup>58</sup> (Of course, Dio's complexity in judgment of Severus may simply reflect that of his subject's behaviour.)

**Dio's and Herodian's account of the occasion and motivation for the coup: those relating to the soldiers.**

The differences between Dio and Herodian just outlined, in terms of generation, social class, point of view, and degree of involvement with the principals of the succession of 971=218, lead to differences of content and emphasis in their accounts of it. Dio's account of the soldiers' motivations for wishing to overthrow Macrinus focuses on Macrinus' alleged misjudgement in attempting to restore military discipline, reportedly lax or erratic under Caracalla, and to mend the finances of the state, supposedly seriously dilapidated by Caracalla.<sup>59</sup> Herodian's briefer account of these matters, less detailed than Dio's, concentrates more on Macrinus' alleged personal vanity and luxury, and on its contrast with, on the one hand, the privations of the soldiers, and, on the other, the reportedly greater austerity of Caracalla.<sup>60</sup>

In an earlier passage of his text, Dio gives an account of the last days of Caracalla, and of his succession by Macrinus, which, incidentally, describes a series of circumstances and events setting the stage, and providing the occasion, for the events narrated in his account of the *coup* of 971=218.<sup>61</sup> Dio alleges that, in April of 970=217, Macrinus, in his capacity as praetorian prefect, escorting Caracalla

<sup>58</sup> *Dio*, 73.12.4 – 80.16.2, passim, especially chapters 74-77.

<sup>59</sup> *Dio*, 79.28-29.

<sup>60</sup> *Herodian*, 5.2.3-6.

<sup>61</sup> *Dio*, 79.1-27.

through the northern mountains of Syria, whilst preparing for war against the Parthians, having been fortuitously apprised of his own mortal danger, stemming from Caracalla's paranoia, engineers Caracalla's murder.

Macrinus, having there usurped the principate, remains, according both to Dio and Herodian, for the entire span of his brief reign in Syria. He resides at Antioch, near the mouth of the Orontes, a city which already, under Caracalla, who has been based there the last few years of his reign, has virtually become the empire's eastern capital.<sup>62</sup> A consequence of Caracalla's residence there is that, by virtue of that city's becoming, for the duration of his stay, the seat of the imperial court, it also becomes, according to Dio,<sup>63</sup> the residence of his mother, Domna, and, according to Herodian,<sup>64</sup> of her sister, Maesa, too. Thus, when Caracalla dies at the hands of Macrinus' agents — who are themselves, so we are told by Dio, swiftly eliminated by Macrinus — both these ladies are reportedly residing in Antioch.<sup>65</sup> This is a circumstance of some importance, with regard to both historians' accounts of the *coup* which will, within the space of fourteen months, overthrow Macrinus.

For in contrast with his reported ruthlessness towards his agents, as well as his emperor, Macrinus allegedly spares the lives of Domna and Maesa.<sup>66</sup> This is one of the few points at which it is possible to check any of Dio's or Herodian's allegations, concerning the details of the conception and execution of the *coup*, against the evidence of coins and inscriptions. Whether this allegation is true or not as such, we do have imperial artefactual evidence that Maesa survives, indeed thrives, inasmuch as she is eventually granted, by her grandson, Varius, the title of Augusta, which she also enjoys under the reign of Varius' successor, her other grandson, Alexianus, later known as Severus Alexander.<sup>67</sup>

The only possible suggestion of any alternative explanation for Maesa's survival, other than pure, unfounded speculation, would have to be extrapolated from the late antique text of Aurelius Victor.<sup>68</sup> He says that Varius owes his (never contemporary, but only late antique, mediaeval, and modern) appellation as Heliogabalus to having fled to that god's sanctuary, presumably from Macrinus. If so, it might also be presumed that Maesa fled with him, and owes her survival to that circumstance, rather than to Macrinus' clemency. But the source is so late, and the occasion of the fundamental claim itself — that Varius takes refuge in the shrine of Elagabal — is so clearly dependent on the author's need to explain a nomenclatorial peculiarity, the designation of an emperor by the name of a god, that it should not be taken at face value. One may, therefore, reasonably conclude that, at least in this particular respect, Dio's and

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62 *Dio*, 78.30.1

63 *Dio*, 79.23.1-6.

64 *Herodian*, 5.3.2.

65 *Dio*, 79.5.4-5.

66 *Dio*, 79.23.2; *Herodian*, 5.3.2.

67 Coins: *Monnayage*, 395-443; Inscriptions: *CIL*, 8, 2564, 2715.

68 *Victor*, 23.1.

Herodian's accounts accord with the evidence of imperial artefacts, and that Macrinus did most likely spare Domna and Maesa, as well as the latter's offspring, much to his eventual regret.

Macrinus allegedly compounds this error by allowing Domna to live out her remaining days at Antioch. Dio suggests that he does so more out of fear of a backlash from the soldiers, with whom Domna is popular, than out of charity. Thus Macrinus provides a venue and focus, near the seat of imperial power, for dissent and intrigue.<sup>69</sup> Despite this apparent attempt to avoid antagonising the soldiers, Macrinus nevertheless manages to do so.

For after succeeding to the principate, Macrinus allegedly loses a battle against the Parthians, and concludes peace with them, on terms righting the wrongs done them by Caracalla. (Dio, discussing that war, suggests that it resulted from Caracalla's gratuitous insults to the Parthians, and that its pursuit was not in Rome's interest.)<sup>70</sup> On occupying Caracalla's seat of government in Antioch, Macrinus is, by Dio's account, dismayed at the state of the exchequer, squandered by Caracalla, largely on bribery of the soldiers, whom Caracalla has allowed to grow unruly. As well as re-imposing discipline, Macrinus proposes, so Dio claims, to pay less from the start to new recruits, leading long-serving soldiers to fear yet further vexations and reductions, redounding to their own disadvantage. In addition to resenting the regulations visited upon them, and what they see as threatened economies at their expense, the troops are reportedly contemptuous of the less than glorious peace negotiated by Macrinus with the Parthians. Restless, moreover, after a long winter's confinement in Syria, a consequence of that peace, the soldiers, so we are told, ἐταράσσονται: "were becoming turbulent."<sup>71</sup>

Dio also describes the opinions of Macrinus allegedly held by the senate and people of Rome. They need not be discussed here in any detail, since they are the views of collectivities powerless, during this period, even to influence, much less determine, an imperial succession, both by virtue of their long-standing marginalisation in this respect, compared to the decisive power of the soldiers, and of their distance, in this case, from the theatre of action, Syria. Suffice it to say that Dio does not miss a chance to draw attention to the inappropriateness of Macrinus' elevation, given his equestrian status, or to indulge his usual wont for relating prodigies, portents and prophecies of impending turns of fate, in this case Macrinus' proximate downfall.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect, for the present discussion, of Dio's account of these matters is his observation of the contrast between, on the one hand, the relief allegedly felt by the senate and people of Rome at the death of Caracalla, supposedly manifest in their consequent willingness to tolerate Macrinus, despite his shortcomings, as Caracalla's successor, and, on the other, the speed and

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69 *Dio*, 79.23.2-3.

70 *Dio*, 79.17.3.

71 *Dio*, 79.28.1.

ease with which the soldiers' attitude toward Caracalla, previously disrespectful almost to the point of contempt,<sup>72</sup> reportedly turns into fondly nostalgic recollection, fuelled by their dislike of Macrinus.<sup>73</sup> This circumstance contributes, in the next stage of Dio's narrative, to their willingness to replace Macrinus with a boy claiming to be Caracalla's son. This is why that boy's official imperial nomenclature, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, implying as it does that claim, plays such a crucial role in this succession.

Should one wish to assess, in the light of the epistemological and methodological standards operating here, the particular likelihood of Dio's account of the soldiers' motivation, relative to fact, one would frankly be at a loss. There is simply no fact with which to compare it. We have no independent evidence, from coins or inscriptions, relevant to any of the policies, other than, conceivably, the clemency to Domna and Maesa, which Dio ascribes to Macrinus, which, allegedly, despite that clemency, arouse against him the ire of the soldiers. Macrinus' reign is too short for meaningful statistical analysis of his coinage, which, in the case of a significantly longer reign, might render clues to the evolution of economic policy. And we lack direct epigraphic or papyrological evidence of the decrees or instructions that, presumably, if Dio speaks true, would have proclaimed new disciplinary rules, or announced the vigorous enforcement of old ones. Nor do we have those documents which would have set out new pay scales for recent recruits. Therefore the best that one can do, in attempting such an assessment, is either to compare Dio's account of these matters to one's general knowledge, or rather body of belief, concerning the state of relations, and balance of forces, between the army and the principate, at the time in question, or else to rely entirely on common sense.

Much of what one might be tempted to think of as one's general knowledge, with respect to that state of relations, and balance of forces, is based on one's reading of secondary sources such as Domaszewski's *Religion des Römischen Heeres*, 1895, and his *Rangordnung des Römischen Heeres*, 1908. The best of these are based on both imperial artefacts and ancient historiography, including, in the latter category, Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the reigns of Severus and Caracalla. But even the best of these secondary sources usually fail to draw a rigorous, systematic distinction, with respect to their epistemological status, between imperial artefacts and ancient historiography. Any general knowledge based on such secondary sources would, therefore, by the epistemological criteria here espoused, have to be classified rather as a body of belief. To attempt to assess the likelihood of Dio's account of these matters by comparing it to a body of belief based, to a significant extent, on Dio's own accounts of similar matters, does not accord with the methodological guidelines of the present study.

I am not aware of any academic study specifically addressing the question of the state of relations, and balance of forces, between the army and the principate, during the reigns of Severus and Caracalla, which draws the same epistemological distinctions, and follows the same methodological strictures

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<sup>72</sup> Dio, 79.1.4.

<sup>73</sup> Dio, 79.9.2.

operating here. This is not to criticise existing treatments of these matters, occurring in biographies of emperors, or histories of the period. It is simply to say that no secondary source which does not draw the distinction drawn here, between the epistemological status of imperial artefacts, on the one hand, and ancient historiography, on the other, may be cited here as an authority, in judging the likelihood of ancient historiographical accounts, because this study makes that distinction its central methodological criterion. Since, moreover, objective historical fact, as here defined, relevant to understanding that balance of forces, is not forthcoming, one is left with the facts, or rather generalities, such as they may be, of human nature, which means that one can only attempt such an assessment on the basis of common sense, most likely derived from experience of similar cases in one's own lifetime, over which one presumably has, whether rightly or wrongly, fewer epistemological qualms.

The soldiers' motives, as described by Dio, seem plausible enough, in view of human nature. Their resentment of Macrinus is, in his account, linked to their perception, whether accurate or not, of threats to their perceived self-interest, a plausible source at any time of motivation for revolts against authority. Dio makes it clear that, by his own standards, the soldiers' perception of their self interest in this respect involves unwarranted pretensions, and stems from a grave deterioration in the level of discipline among them. In Dio's view, it reflects as ill on them, in their capacity as soldiers, as does his manifest lack of skill on Macrinus, in his as emperor, when seeking to impose on the soldiers objectively necessary reforms, having misjudged, in Dio's opinion, the proper time and manner for doing so.

Anyone who, from a position of authority, has ever attempted to reform the institution over which that authority presumably extends, will recognise Macrinus' dilemma, and not be unduly surprised at his failure to resolve it successfully. As for the soldiers' unwarranted pretensions, and the deterioration in their discipline, these too are familiar, not only from modern political and military history, where factual evidence of similar cases is available from states that are, or have recently been ruled by military dictatorships — our nearest analogue to the Roman principate — but also from labour relations, even in relatively modern economies.

Dio closes his account of the soldiers' restless mood with a rhetorical flourish. Having first announced, as the proximate outcome of the soldiers' unrest, the substitution of Macrinus by *τοιούτου ἕτερον* ... *ὅφ' οὐδὲν ὅ τι οὐ κακὸν καὶ αἰσχρὸν ἐγένετο*: "a successor just like him, one by whom nothing was done that was not evil or base," Dio invokes a portent of Macrinus' doom — an eclipse of the sun — followed by a quotation from Homer: *ἀμφὶ δ' ἐσάλπιγγεν μέγας οὐρανός, ἄϊε δὲ Ζεύς*. "Rang the vast whelkin with clarion calls, and Zeus heard the tumult."<sup>74</sup>

Dio's allegation of an eclipse, a factual point of reference, whose exact date, time, and geographical range of visibility are known from astronomical calculations, has been examined with reference to that

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74 *Dio*, 79.29.2-30-1, quoting *Iliad* 21.388.



here in question, with the conclusion that Dio's date for it, preceding these events, is wrong.<sup>75</sup> The only eclipse visible that year in Italy or Syria was in autumn. This leads one to suspect that Dio may, whether deliberately, or merely forgetfully, have transposed its date in his text for greater rhetorical effect.

Herodian's account of circumstances and events, immediately previous to the *coup*, coincides with Dio's in broad outline, but differs by virtue of its greater brevity, lesser degree of detail, at least with respect to the motivation of the soldiers for wishing to depose Macrinus, and in the location of its emphasis.<sup>76</sup> It coincides in noting the universal joy in Rome, not so much at the accession of Macrinus, as at the fall of Caracalla, saying that: ἐν ἀδείᾳ πολλῇ καὶ εἰκόνι ἐλευθερίας ἐβίωσαν ἐκείνου τοῦ ἔτους οὗ μόνου ὁ Μακρίνος ἐβασίλευσε: "for the single year that Macrinus was emperor, men lived in security and the semblance of freedom."<sup>77</sup> It differs in ascribing the soldiers' discontent with Macrinus mainly to his personal vanity and fatuous affectations, as well as to his fondness for mime shows and rhythmic dancing, rather than to any specific economies or regulations he may have imposed upon them. It does, however, note their bitterness at the spectacle of Macrinus' life of luxury, while they are wintering in tents, sometimes short of supplies. It also mentions the contrast they draw between Macrinus' alleged extravagance, and Caracalla's supposedly more military habits of personal discipline.

Herodian's account of the soldiers' motivation seems less likely than Dio's, in the light of common sense. Irritation at an emperor's fatuousness and vanity, or anger at his fondness for mime shows and dancing, seems a more likely cause for his murder by a close associate, or even by his wife (who appears to have been dead already) than in a military *coup*. Yet the soldiers' bitterness, reported by Herodian, at the contrast between Macrinus' opulent life style and theirs, insofar as it coincides with Dio's more specific allegations regarding their perceived self-interest, is somewhat more convincing. Again, as in the case of Dio's account of these matters, there are no known facts with which to compare Herodian's. Thus concurring in general outline, though not in all specifics, with Dio's, which arguably forms its basis,<sup>78</sup> Herodian's account may be said to enjoy a similar, if slightly lesser, degree of likelihood.

Herodian, brings the passage of his narrative concerning these matters to a close with this observation: ἐχερῆν δὲ ἅρα Μακρίνον ἐνιαυτοῦ μόνου τῇ βασιλείᾳ ἐντρυγγήσαντα ἅμα τῷ βίῳ καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν καταλῦσαι, μικρὰν καὶ εὐτελεῖ πρόφασιν τοῖς στρατιώταις ἐς ἃ ἐβούλοντο τῆς τύχης παρασχοῦσης: "it was obviously inevitable that Macrinus would lose the empire, and his life too, whenever chance provided a small, trivial excuse for the soldiers to have their way."<sup>79</sup>

75 Petrikovits, H. v., *Die Chronologie der Regierung Macrins*, *Klio*, 31, p.103-107, esp. p. 105-106.

76 *Herodian*, 5.2.1-6.

77 *Herodian*, 5.2.2.

78 Kolb, F., *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der "Historia Augusta"*, *BHAF*, 4.9, *BHAC*, 1972.

79 *Herodian*, 5.3.1.

**Dio's and Herodian's account of causes and motivations for the coup: those relating to Maesa and her household.**

Let us leave the soldiers restless in the ranks, nursing their resentments, and consider now the source which will provide that excuse, as presented first by Dio, then by Herodian: Maesa's machinations with a view to placing her grandson, Varius, on the throne. With regard to the political, dynastic and familial circumstances, leading to Maesa's assumption of protagonism in this matter, Dio's account is the fuller.

It will be remembered that, according to Dio, Macrinus, sparing Domna, allows her to continue residing in Antioch. When Domna's intrigues against him try his patience, Macrinus orders her to leave, but she pre-empts eviction by dying, whether of cancer, exacerbated by beating her breast on learning of Caracalla's death, or self-starvation, or both.<sup>80</sup> Domna's death has the consequence of thrusting Maesa into a leading role. With Domna dead, her sister Maesa, a widow of some years' standing, becomes effective, though not, by Roman custom, official head of her family.

The family whereof I speak here is not, at least not to begin with, identical or coincident with that of the Severan dynasty. By Roman law and custom, though Julia Domna and Julia Maesa, to give them their full names, both belong to the same *gens*, that of their father, Julius Bassianus, neither belongs to that of Severus. Though neither Dio nor Herodian does so, Maesa's family, as opposed to *gens*, may best be defined, for the purposes of the present discussion, in terms of matrilineal descent. This stands in contrast to Roman patrilineality, but in perfect accordance with certain Semitic theories of kinship, relevant here, since the persons involved are all Arabs or Phoenicians. This family is composed of Maesa, her two daughters, Soemias and Mamaea, and their two or more children, including Varius and Alexianus. Gessius Marcianus, the husband of Mamaea, and, presumably, father of Alexianus, is at this point the only adult male, connected by marriage to this matrilineal family, still living.

With the death of Caracalla, the absence of any known direct male descendant of Severus provides an occasion, which is also, from Maesa's point of view, an opportunity, for the advancement of the two young males in her family, Varius and Alexianus. The background to this occasion and opportunity lies in circumstances previously related by Dio, and suggested also by imperial artefacts, or rather by their lack. In earlier chapters of Dio's *History*, Caracalla murders his younger brother, Geta,<sup>81</sup> before that youth reproduces or marries, and also murders his own wife, Plautilla,<sup>82</sup> without having fathered any children by her. Since, moreover, he has long been impotent, as well as paranoid, Caracalla dies leaving no heir of any sort, whether legitimate, natural, or adopted.<sup>83</sup> The total lack of any artefacts referring to an heir of

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<sup>80</sup> *Dio*, 79.23.1-6.

<sup>81</sup> *Dio*, 78.2

<sup>82</sup> *Dio*, 78.1.1.

<sup>83</sup> *Dio*, 78.15.3-5; 78.16.1-4.

Caracalla constitutes an argument *ex silentio* confirming the likely absence of any such individual.

This absence renders conceivable Maesa's strategy, based on asserting that her two cited grandsons are Caracalla's bastards, to transfer them both from the *gentes* of their respective fathers, Sextus Varius Marcellus and Gessius Marcianus, into that of Septimius Severus, in order to occupy the dynastic vacancy created by this absence. In addition to this, by virtue of her position as the head of the matrilineal family to which these boys, by an alternative theory of kinship, continue to belong, as well as on account of her connections and experience, and, one may presume, her temperamental capacity for domination, she will be in a position to rule while the elder of her grandsons, Varius, reigns, keeping the younger in reserve.

Because of the nature of the strategy chosen, and the requirement that its protagonists, Varius and Alexianus, appear to be the sons of Caracalla, the existence of Gessius Marcianus, the father of Alexianus, is not only irrelevant, but inconvenient. Interestingly, despite being the only adult male related to this matrilineal family still living at this time, he does not, at least in the accounts of Dio and Herodian, play any active role in the *coup*. Indeed his only contribution is to be killed in its early stages, according to Dio, because of his relationship to its protagonists.

The question of who, precisely, does play an active role in the *coup*, whether in its conception, or its execution, must now be addressed. It is clear that both Dio and Herodian consider Maesa the effective head of her family. Moreover, in both of their accounts she plays a major role throughout the reign of Varius, and later in that of Alexianus, renamed Severus Alexander. But with regard to the precise questions now under consideration here — Who conceives the plot to put Varius on the throne? How, exactly, does this conception occur? Who puts the resulting plan of action into practice? Where and when and how? — there are, nevertheless, certain differences between the two historians.

It will be remembered that Dio concludes his account of the soldiers' restlessness with a rhetorical flourish, announcing the imminent accession of an execrable emperor, invoking an eclipse, as a portent of Macrinus' doom, and quoting from Homer. Immediately after this, Dio introduces the next section of his text: ἐπράχθη δὲ ὧδε: "These things came about in the following manner." The sentence immediately following this begins with the statement: Ἡ Μαῖσα ἡ τῆς Ἰουλίας τῆς Αὐγούστης ἀδελφὴ δύο τε θυγατέρας, Σοαιμίδα καὶ Μαμαίαν, ἐξ Ἰουλίου Αὐρίτου... ἔχουσα: "Maesa, the sister of Julia Augusta, had two daughters, Soaemias and Mamaea, by her husband Julius Avitus." Dio goes on to enumerate the members of her family, including Varius, whom he calls Avitus. Having mentioned the death of that boy's namesake, his grandfather, Maesa's husband and Dio's senatorial colleague, Dio then introduces Εὐτυχιανός τις: "a certain Eutybianus."<sup>84</sup>

From the context, which is difficult to make out exactly, because Dio's text, as it has come down to

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84 Dio, 79.31.1.

us, contains several lacunae at this point,<sup>85</sup> it would seem that this Eutychianus is a member of Maesa's household, possibly a freedman or a slave. The question of his precise identity, nature, and status, is considered elsewhere in these studies,<sup>86</sup> and will be revisited below, in discussing his role in the execution of the *coup*. Suffice it at this point to say that, in Dio's narrative, Eutychianus assumes, at first, not only a leading role in that execution, but also, by one reading, in its conception: Eutychianus τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐς τὸν Μακρήνιον ἀπέχθειαν συνιδὼν: "becoming aware of the strong dislike of the soldiers for Macrinus;" καὶ τι καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἡλίου ὃν Ἐλεγάβαλον ἐπικαλοῦσι καὶ μεγάλως θρησκεύουσιν, ἄλλων τε τινῶν μαντειῶν ἀναπεισθεῖς: and "partly persuaded by the Sun-god whom they call Elagabalus and worship devotedly, and also by some other oracular utterances;" Eutychianus ἐπεχείρησε τὸν τε Μακρήνιον καθελεῖν καὶ τὸν Ἀουῖτον τὸν τῆς Μαίσης ἔγγονον αὐτοκράτορα, καίπερ παιδίον ἔτι ὄντα, ἀντικαταστήσαι: "undertook to overthrow Macrinus and to set up as emperor in his stead Avitus, Maesa's grandson, who was still a mere boy."<sup>87</sup>

Despite Eutychianus' apparent protagonism at this point, it is, however, clear, if this passage is properly understood in its context, that Maesa remains, in Dio's view, the leading character behind the conception and execution of the *coup*. The juxtaposition of Dio's rhetorical flourish, foretelling the fall of Macrinus, with a bridging sentence: "These things came about in the following manner," immediately followed by Maesa's introduction into the narrative, makes it abundantly clear that whatever follows, with respect to "these things," stems from, or relates to Maesa, who embodies the "manner" in which they "came about." Dio's antique reader, familiar with the narrative conventions here adopted, knows, at this point, that whatever follows will, if Dio adheres, as he does, to those conventions, eventually return to Maesa; as indeed it does, on numerous occasions, after Eutychianus has dropped altogether out of the narrative.<sup>88</sup>

Thus whatever Eutychianus does, he does under the aegis, as it were, of Maesa; even when, as Dio soon tells us, he takes a particular step, leading Varius to the legionary camp, without her knowledge.<sup>89</sup> For, given the hierarchical nature of Syro-Roman society during that period, it is very unlikely that Eutychianus, a dependent member of Maesa's household, would take such an initiative as to bring about a *coup d'état* to place her puerile grandson on the throne all on his own, or that Dio, concerned at least with verisimilitude, if not with truth, knowing the nature of that society, would impute such an initiative to him,

85 Dio's narrative from 79.2 to 80.8 inclusive survives in the form of a 5<sup>th</sup> century MS, *Vaticanus* 1288.

86 Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, 1999, p. 117-141, (henceforth *Riddle*).

87 *Dio*, 79.31.1-2.

88 Eutychianus is named only at *Dio*, 79.31.1 and 79.32.4. As for the question of his possible conflation with Gannys, who is named in *Dio*, 79.38.3, and 80.6, see the discussion below, and in *Riddle*. Maesa occurs by name at *Dio*, 79.30.2; 79.31.2; 79.38.4; 80.6.2; 80.17.2 and as Varius' τῆς μητρός: grandmother, at 80.11; 80.14.2; 80.15.4; 80.19.1<sup>2</sup>; 80.19.3.

89 *Dio*, 79.31.4

without its being understood from the context, both literary and social, to reflect the will of his patroness. Eutychianus' mode of execution of that will may, however, in operational terms, display individual initiative, perhaps even exceeding his instructions. It may therefore be understood that, in Dio's narrative, despite the important role played in the conception and execution of the *coup* by Eutychianus, and by certain others, the fundamental motivation activating it, among its non-military participants, is Maesa's, and that its conception results at least from her will, if not also from her wit.

With regard to the question of the likelihood of Dio's account of the conception of the *coup*, it can be said that it is plausible that Maesa, even if she was the intellectual author of a plot, would, as a Syrian noblewoman, most likely work through intermediaries in setting it in motion. The role of Eutychianus is, therefore, seen in this light, perfectly plausible also.

At this stage of the story, however, Herodian's account of Maesa's alleged role in the conception of the *coup* is fuller than Dio's. Herodian's own rhetorical flourish, quoted above, bringing to a close his account of the soldiers' resentment of Macrinus with what one may call a secular, common-sense prophecy of that emperor's doom (rather than a supernatural prodigy, such as those favoured by Dio), is also immediately followed by his introducing Maesa into the narrative. The immediacy of this juxtaposition, and its formulaic style: *Μαῖσα ἣν τις ὄνομα*: "There was a woman called Maesa," coming at this point, clearly indicate that it is Maesa who is destined, in Herodian's narrative, to provide that "small, trivial excuse for the soldiers to have their way." It may also be noted that Herodian never mentions Eutychianus.

According to Herodian, *παρὰ πάντα οὖν τὸν τῆς ἀδελφῆς βίον ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ διέτριψεν αὐτῇ χρόνου πολυετοῦς, παρ' ὃν Σεβήρῳ τε καὶ Ἀντωνίνῳ ἐβασίλευσαν*: "for the whole time her sister was alive during the many years of the rule of Severus and Antoninus," (by whom, at this point, he means Caracalla) "Maesa lived at the imperial court." After Caracalla's and Domna's deaths, Macrinus has, in Herodian's account, allowed Maesa to retire to her home town, Emesa, upstream on the Orontes from Antioch, with her considerable wealth, accumulated during more than two decades within grasp of power and influence, fully intact.<sup>90</sup>

Like Dio, Herodian proceeds to enumerate the members of her family. Unlike Dio, he develops at this point the role of Varius, calling him Bassianus, as priest of the Syrian sun god Elagabal; a role which he also assigns to Varius' younger cousin Alexianus. Herodian describes, in sensuous detail, the huge temple of Elagabal at Emesa, the fame and purchase of its cult, extending well beyond that city, the singularity of its aniconic cult object, a large black ovoid stone, and the splendid costume and appearance of Varius, in his role as high priest: *ἦν δὲ τὴν ἡλικίαν ἀκμαῖος καὶ τὴν ὄψιν τῶν κατ' αὐτὸν ὠραιότατος μειρακίων πάντων. ἐς τὸ αὐτὸ δὴ συνιόντων κάλλους σώματος, ἡλικίας ἀκμῆς, ἀρβοῦ σχήματος, ἀπέικασεν ἄν*

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90 *Herodian*, 5.3.2.

τις τὸ μαιράκιον Διονύσου καλαῖς εἰκόσιν: (Varius) “was in the prime of his youth and the most handsome of all the young men of his time. With this combination of good looks, youth, and splendid dress there was a possible resemblance between the young man and the magnificent statues of Dionysus.”<sup>91</sup>

According to Herodian, the soldiers of the nearby legionary fort are already familiar with Varius, and, moreover, infatuated with him, even before being induced to support his claim to the imperial throne. They reportedly come from their fort to Emesa, to watch him perform the rituals of Elagabal, which include dancing to the music of flutes and pipes and other instruments. Allegedly attracted by his boyish beauty, a theme to which Herodian repeatedly draws attention,<sup>92</sup> they view him with fairly close interest because they know that he is *γένους ὄντα βασιλικοῦ*: “a member of the imperial family.”

This, of course, as we have seen in the discussion, above, of Maesa’s matrilineal family, is not, strictly speaking, true; at least not by Roman law and custom. Membership in a Roman *gens* is transmitted by the father, not by the mother, nor by marriage. While Maesa, her daughters, and their children are obviously closely associated with the Severan imperial family, by virtue of Maesa’s sisterhood with the empress Domna, and, according to Herodian, cited above, her co-residence with her sister at the imperial court, neither Domna nor Maesa are Septimiae, after the *nomen* of Severus. Rather, Domna, Maesa, and the latter’s daughters are Iuliae, after the *nomen* both of the father of Domna and Maesa, and of Maesa’s husband. Those daughters’ children in turn are, respectively, Varii and Gessii, after their fathers’ *nomina*.<sup>93</sup>

So one must wonder whether here Herodian is invoking, without explanation, an alternative theory of kinship, whereby the imperial family could, somehow, be deemed to include that of Maesa; or whether he is simply lax in his use of terminology; and, if the latter, which, given Herodian’s observable habits of composition,<sup>94</sup> seems quite possible, whether that laxity is due to carelessness, or whether it is an example, not only of *oratio*, but, as it were, of *laxitas obliqua*, reflecting the laxity of the soldiers’ view of the matter, thus faithfully reported by Herodian. Another possible explanation for his characterisation of Varius’ *γένος* as *βασιλικόν* is that Herodian may be referring here not to his membership in a family allied by marriage to that of Severus, but rather to his royal, or princely, status in his own right. For by virtue of holding the hereditary high priesthood of Elagabal, Varius is also, in accordance with the customs of dynastic priesthoods in the ancient Near East,<sup>95</sup> heir to the lordship of Emesa, once an independent kingdom, now something like a “princely state” within the Roman empire. This, however, if so, would also be a case of lax terminology, since there are several alternative words in Greek, derived from terms

91 *Herodian*, 5.3.7.

92 *Herodian*, 5.3.7; 5.3.8; 5.3.9.

93 *OCD: Family*, p. 586; *Gens*, p. 631-2; *Marriage law*, p. 928.

94 See Whittaker’s footnote 1 on page 22 of his text and translation of *Herodian’s History* in the Loeb edition.

95 Sullivan, R.D., *Priesthoods of the Eastern Dynastic Aristocracy*, *EPRO*, 66.2, 1978; Sullivan, R.D., *The Dynasty of Emesa*, *ANRW*, 2, 1977, p. 198-219.

other than βασιλεύς, normally meaning “emperor,” which would more exactly denote such princely status. Yet another possibility is that Herodian is getting ahead of himself, by about two sentences, in describing the soldiers’ alleged apprehension of Varius’ lineage, at the point in his narrative here in question — before his text brings them into contact with Maesa — as if they were already in possession of information which they do not, in fact, receive from Maesa till two sentences later.

That information is, of course, the claim that Varius is the son of Caracalla. It is interesting to note that, by Herodian’s account, it is the soldiers’ admiration for Varius which prompts Maesa to tell them this: πρὸς οὓς ἐκείνη θαυμάζοντας τὸν παῖδα, εἴτε πλάσασμένη εἴτε ἀληθεύουσα, ἐξεῖπεν ὅτι ἄρα Ἀντωνίνου υἱός ἐστι φύσει, τῇ δὲ ὑπολήψει ἄλλου δοκοίη· ἐπιφοιτῆσαι γὰρ αὐτὸν ταῖς θυγατρᾶσιν αὐτῆς νέαις τε οὔσαις καὶ ὥραίαις, καὶ ὃν καιρὸν ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις σὺν τῇ ἀδελφῇ διέτριβεν: “Because they admired the boy, she told them (what may or may not have been true) that he was actually the son of Antoninus,” (Caracalla) “although it was assumed he had a different father. Antoninus, she said, had slept with her daughters when they were young and able to bear children, at the time when she was living in the palace with her sister.” The precise sense of this sentence is open to further interpretation. The participle θαυμάζοντας could simply be temporal, rather than causal, and ἐξεῖπεν could mean “revealed” rather than “told.” The implications of these alternative readings will be further developed in analysis of this passage, below.

It should be noted, *en passant*, that both Maesa’s daughters, hence both her grandsons, are included in this claim. It would seem that the notion of keeping a spare pretender in reserve is implicit in her allegation. Given the eventual outcome of events, the degree of foresight credited to her here by Herodian seems remarkable.

In considering Herodian’s account of the conception of the *coups*, the narrative order is crucial. The soldiers’ pre-existing admiration for the boy, a curious mixture of erotic, aesthetic, religious, and apparently misplaced dynastic sentiments, causes, or at least provides the occasion for Maesa to launch the rumour of Varius’ Caracallan paternity. A question immediately arises: whether Herodian here intends the reader to infer that Maesa would not have launched the rumour in the absence of the soldiers’ admiration for the boy. So does another, implicit in that: whether Herodian intends us to believe that the claim explicit in that rumour is suggested to Maesa by the soldiers’ misplaced dynastic sentiments (assuming Herodian intends us to think them misplaced); or that it is in her mind all along, but that she only ventures to put it forward in view of those sentiments.

The vocabulary and syntax of the relevant sentence leaves room for any of these interpretations, especially since the degree of causality implied by the participle construction πρὸς οὓς ἐκείνη θαυμάζοντας τὸν παῖδα... ἐξεῖπεν ὅτι ἄρα Ἀντωνίνου υἱός ἐστι φύσει is not particularly strong. Indeed its force could, here, be merely temporal, rather than causal. Even in that case, however, it would still constitute the occasion, if not the inspiration, for Maesa’s advancement of Varius’ dynastic claim. The choice of the verb ἐξεῖπεν, meaning something closer to “revealed” or “announced,” than merely “said” or “told,” could be

interpreted to indicate premeditation on Maesa's part. Also, the particle *ἄρα* could here indicate surprise, that which she expects the soldiers to feel, on learning that, contrary to received opinion, her grandson is not the son of her daughter's husband, but of Caracalla.<sup>96</sup>

Whether true or false, the rumour, according to Herodian, quickly spreads through the ranks, together with the notion that Maesa *σωρούς εἶναι χρημάτων, ἐκείνην δὲ ἐτοίμως πάντα προσέσθαι τοῖς στρατιώταις, εἰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ γένει ἀνανεώσαιντο*: "had loads of wealth, all of which she was willing to distribute to the soldiers if they restored the empire to her family." The addition of the solid weight of Maesa's gold to the soldiers' pre-existing sentiments seems to swing the balance, for, so Herodian reports: *ὥς δὲ συνέθεντο, νύκτωρ εἰ κατέλθοιεν λαθόντες, ἀνοίξειν τὰς πύλας καὶ δέξασθαι πᾶν τὸ γένος ἔνδον βασιλέα τε καὶ υἱὸν ἀποδείξειν Ἀντωνίνου, ἐπέδωκεν ἑαυτήν ἢ πρεσβῦτις, ἐλομένη πάντα κίνδυνον ἀναρρῖψαι μᾶλλον ἢ ἰδιωτεύειν καὶ δοκεῖν ἀπερρῖφθαι*: "The soldiers agreed that, if the family came secretly during the night, they would open the gates to take them all in and would declare the son of Antoninus emperor. The old woman agreed to this because she would rather have risked any danger than live as an ordinary person, apparently rejected." Thus Herodian not only reports the meeting of minds that conceives the *coup* that leads to this succession, but also suggests the complexity of motives underlying that meeting.

#### **Analysis, comparison, and assessment of Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the causes and motivations for the coup.**

In analysing Herodian's text, comparing it to Dio's, and assessing the likelihood of each, one must remember the various distinctions outlined above, when considering how to approach ancient accounts of that *coup*. Fundamental is that inherent in the logical relationship, which is independent of any account, between the two main elements in this succession: Macrinus' fall, and Varius' rise. The former does not necessarily imply the latter, though the latter does necessarily involve the former. Also basic to this discussion is the difference between Dio's and Herodian's accounts, stemming from their diverse authorial motives, deriving in turn from their different generations and backgrounds. With regard to the motives and actions of their more or less common sets of *dramatis personae*, vital is the distinction between those of the soldiers, on the one hand, and those of Maesa and her household, on the other, as reported by each historian. Finally, crucial is the difference between real and ostensible motives, since the *coup*, hence the succession, may well be predicated on collusion in support of a lie.

The question of the likelihood of Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the soldiers' motives, in wishing to depose Macrinus, has been discussed, above, with the conclusion that both their accounts are fairly plausible in this respect, Dio's rather more so than Herodian's. But we must add the proviso that this

<sup>96</sup> My especial thanks are due here to T.V. Buttrey, for his alternative readings of this, and other passages subsequently quoted and discussed, as well as for his perceptive comments on their possible interpretation. I should add that he does not necessarily agree with all my conclusions.



plausibility holds only for the soldiers' real, as opposed to ostensible motive. Their ostensible motive for launching a *coup* is one, not of their own making, but provided either, according to Dio, by Eutychianus, acting for Maesa, or, according to Herodian, by Maesa herself. Whether provided by Eutychianus, or by Maesa, that ostensible motive is identical: to place Caracalla's alleged bastard on the throne.

Maesa's ostensible motive, as presented to the soldiers, and apparently espoused by them, is, according to Dio, to restore to power the Severan dynasty, interrupted by Macrinus for fourteen months. Dio's constant use of the term Pseudantoninus, to refer to Varius, in disparagement of his claim of Caracallan paternity, ridicules this motive, thereby implicitly identifying it as operative in this case. A further implication is that, were a revolt to replace Macrinus with a genuine descendant of Severus, even with a bastard, it might paradoxically be regarded, at least in some sense, as restoring legitimacy. This, of course, is to presuppose that the dynastic model for transmission of the principate is one accepted or espoused, at that time, by the soldiers; a supposition which is open to debate, for many reasons. Among these are that at least in the case of ancient history, we cannot know the state of mind of any collectivity, such as that we here call "the soldiers" (if, indeed, any such entity as a collective state of mind exists at all) except by the outcomes of their actions; and these are not necessarily an accurate guide to motivations. Another is that there may be a difference between that collectivity's real, original motivation, that, as related by Dio, of their perceived self-interest; and the goal they purport to serve in their collective action. While their original motivation may, as we have said, be plausible enough, the soldiers may prefer, in performance of actions prompted thereby, to ascribe those actions, and their goal, to another motivation, which might, for whatever reason, seem, at least to them, more worthy, hence ostensible: that of restoring dynastic legitimacy.

Like Dio's account of that meeting of minds between Maesa and the soldiers, Herodian's provides separate sets of motives for each of the parties involved in the *coup*. These motives, while somewhat less plausible than Dio's for the soldiers' desire to depose Macrinus, are more fully developed than Dio's for Maesa's desire to return to a position of influence, or to gain one of power, in Rome: her refusal "to live as an ordinary person, apparently rejected;" in other words: her pride. For, extrapolating from Herodian's account, she could easily, but for her pride, have been content to live in comfortable retirement in Emesa, among her own people. Had she done so, perhaps I would not be writing, nor my reader perusing this study.

In addition, like Dio, to providing separate sets of motives for each party involved, corresponding to each distinct element in this succession — the fall of Macrinus, and the rise of Varius — Herodian's account provides something Dio's does not: a set of motives, independent in origin from the soldiers' wish to be rid of Macrinus, and independent also from, as well as prior to Maesa's machinations, for them to wish to support Varius' dynastic claim, once it becomes known to them: their infatuation with the boy. Herodian's allegation of a distinct set of soldierly motives for supporting that claim radically distinguishes his account from Dio's, and constitutes, in my view, Herodian's most original contribution

to the palimpsest of ancient narrative accounts of the *coup*. Irrespective, however, of its originality, the likelihood of this allegation must be assessed, in terms of its possible role in the conception of the *coup*, assuming the *coup* really took place. Before doing so, however, let us finish establishing the existence and nature of that motive, as described in Herodian's text, concerning this matter in particular.

Herodian's difference from Dio here is not only informational, insofar as he provides an allegation that Dio does not, but also technical and stylistic: he does so by way of suggestion, based on ambiguity. For Herodian seems, in his account of the conception of the *coup*, deliberately to generate a very high degree of ambiguity, leading to differing possible interpretations of his text. Not only that, but he manipulates his ambiguities, by means of suggestion and indication, in such a way as to lead his reader towards a particular interpretation of the conception of the *coup*, one which may be characterised as sceptical and ironic, its irony hinging on the distinction between real and ostensible motives.

If this is so, then Herodian's apparent superficiality, which I have said, above, sometimes verges on banality, may, at times, be used as a device for leading the reader to delve beneath that surface, and discover hidden depths: depths which, for whatever reason — stylistic, economic, political, or other — Herodian prefers to keep hidden, or at least to make the reader strive to grasp. This is very different from the case of Dio, of whom I have said that he is, though highly opinionated, ambivalent to the point of self-contradiction: Dio seems to be in thrall to his ambivalent opinions, sometimes appearing to feel one way about something or someone, sometimes another, resulting in an overall impression of conflictedness. His ambivalence towards Severus has been cited, above, as a case in point. Herodian, in contrast, seems deliberately to manipulate his ambiguities, appearing to say one thing, but meaning another, resulting in an overall impression of irony. This suggests an affinity between Herodian, at least in his better moments, of which this account seems to be one, and more consummate, consistent masters of irony, such as Lucian, whose works Herodian may or may not have known.

Herodian's ambiguities, whether deliberate or not, may be stated as questions: What is the precise relationship between the soldiers' enthusiasm for Varius, and Maesa's plan to put him on the throne? Is the latter suggested by the former, or does the latter, already present in her mind, merely take advantage of the former? Is the soldiers' apprehension of Varius' lineage as imperial truly that, or does it refer to princely implications of his dynastic priesthood? Or is it merely a case of nomenclatorial laxity? And if so, whose: Herodian's or the soldiers'? What is the decisive motive in the soldiers' decision to support Varius' dynastic claim? Is that claim, for the soldiers, merely an excuse, of which any sort would do, for them to get rid of Macrinus, or are dynastic sentiments decisive, and if so, of what nature and status, in the light of the foregoing questions? How important is the promise of Maesa's money? Would it, on its own, suffice to motivate the *coup*? To what extent is his reader intended, by Herodian, to believe in Varius' dynastic claim? Or that Maesa believes it? Or that the soldiers do so?

It is arguable, by the particular interpretation which I believe to be suggested by Herodian's

subtleties, ambiguities, and ironies, that neither the soldiers' nor Maesa's ostensible motive in the conception of the *coup* is to be taken at face value. That motive, stated in the singular, because shared, is ostensibly to place a son of Caracalla on his rightful throne, thus purportedly restoring dynastic legitimacy. It is, according to this reading, adopted, by both sides, as a matter of policy: a means to an end, from whose successful achievement each party hopes to obtain satisfaction of its real desires. Those real desires, by this reading, are: on the one hand, that of the soldiers to get rid of Macrinus; on the other, that of Maesa to gain and exercise power in Rome. If this reading is right, the meeting of minds between the soldiers and Maesa, leading to the conception of the *coup*, constitutes collusion in advancement of a claim, one that may or may not be true, which, in either case, is merely a means to an end for both parties, in which neither necessarily believes.

While other readings of Herodian's account of the conception of the *coup* are possible, that just outlined seems to me the likeliest, at least on literary grounds, to be the one which he intended; for whatever his presumed intention is worth, whether in terms of the study of history, or in those of literary criticism. Without entering here into the broader literary critical question just raised — that of whether any author's intentions can be known, and if known, matter at all, in the exegesis of a text — it seems to me clear that Herodian's ambiguities in this passage, of which the foremost is *εἴτε πλασμαμένη εἴτε ἀληθεύουσα*: "what may or may not have been true," a characterisation which could apply to the whole of his account, are quite deliberate, and are designed to lead one to this interpretation, which one may, if one so wishes, characterise as sceptical and ironic, even to the point of cynicism.<sup>97</sup>

From this reading of Herodian's account it is clear to me, even more so than it is from any reading of Dio's, that the elevation of Varius is, from Maesa's point of view, purely a means to an end, and that Varius himself is merely an instrument for achieving that end: for Maesa to rule while Varius reigns. As for the question of whether Maesa herself believes that claim, one can only speculate. That it is false, is, on the basis of evidence discussed elsewhere in these studies,<sup>98</sup> very likely. But it is not unknown for people to come to believe propositions they know to be false, particularly if they have invested heavily in those propositions. Dio certainly believes it to be false, and Maesa a liar. Herodian is more polite, but, by this reading of his text, intends us to err more on the side of doubt than of belief.

That some of the soldiers, probably the leaders among them, see the elevation of Varius, not so much as a means to the end of getting rid of Macrinus, for that they could do without Varius, but rather as a way of legitimising that end, and thus of securing the fullest and most energetic participation in the enterprise, by their comrades in arms, is also clearly implied by Herodian's mention of their waiting for a "small, trivial excuse to have their way," which, in his narration, is immediately provided by his

97 An alternative view is that of T.V. Buttrey, in discussion with me regarding this passage: "Herodian doesn't know, and says so, and apparently has no means to determine the truth. I find that clarity itself."

98 QV2, throughout.

account of Maesa's machinations, ostensibly on Varius' behalf, but really on her own. That the soldiers fall in with her machinations for reasons of self-interest is also clearly indicated by Herodian's account of their quick and positive response to Maesa's reported offer of money, if they support her grandson's claim. Nevertheless, characterisation of the soldiers' part in this meeting of minds as collusion, with the implication that they do not really, or at least not necessarily, believe the dynastic claim which they uphold, requires further exegesis, of other details of this passage, not yet mentioned here, in its support.

In support of this interpretation, let me draw attention to Herodian's description of the large black ovoid stone, a meteorite otherwise known as a *βαίτυλος* or *baetyl*, which is the aniconic cult object of the religion of Elagabal: *διοπετῇ τε αὐτὸν εἶναι σεμνολογοῦσιν, ἐξοχὰς τέ τινας βραχείας καὶ τύπους δεικνύουσιν, εἰκόνα τε ἡλίου ἀνέργαστον εἶναι θέλουσιν, οὕτω βλέποντες*: "This stone is worshipped as though it were sent from heaven: on it there are some small projecting pieces and markings that are pointed out, which the people would like to believe are a rough picture of the sun, because this is how they see them."<sup>99</sup> Such a sophisticated, ironic understanding of "the people's" naïve epistemology, occurring in a closely preceding passage of Herodian's text, may be applied to the soldiers' way of seeing Varius' dynastic claim, which they find it in their interest to support. One is reminded of Jane Austen: "How quick come the reasons for approving what we like!"<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, in one of only two sentences separating Herodian's mention of the soldiers' apprehension (or misapprehension) of Varius' lineage as imperial (or royal or princely), and the introduction, into the narrative, of the rumour, launched by Maesa, of his Caracallan paternity, we have another instance, much closer, as it were, to home, of irony, or at least of ambiguity, applying here directly to the soldiers' frequentation of his ritual performances, in the light of their perception of Varius: *φοιτῶντες οὖν οἱ στρατιῶται ἐκάστοτε ἐς τὴν πόλιν, ἔς τε τὸν νεῶν ἰόντες θεησκειᾶς δὴ χάριν, τὸ μαιράκιον ἡδέως ἔβλεπον*: "The soldiers used to go regularly to the city and to the temple, supposedly to worship, but they enjoyed watching the lad." Again, an alternative reading is possible here, giving one a choice between interpreting this passage as ironic, or merely as ambiguous. The notion, implicit in Whittaker's translation, of an opposition between the participle construction *φοιτῶντες ... ἰόντες ... θεησκειᾶς δὴ χάριν* on the one hand, and the main verb clause *τὸ μαιράκιον ἡδέως ἔβλεπον* on the other, is open to discussion, hinging on whether the particle *δὴ* is to be read in this sentence as ironic, hence, in the context, adversative, or not. Either way, Herodian clearly ascribes here to the soldiers the capacity, if not for claiming to do one thing, whilst in reality doing another, as suggested by this translation, at least, as allowed by the alternative reading, for using the occasion provided by doing one thing for doing another. Whether merely claiming to worship Elagabal, or, indeed, sincerely worshipping that god, they are nevertheless enthralled in contemplation of this boy.

99 *Herodian*, 5.3.5.

100 *Persuasion*, Ch. II.

One must consider the nature of that enthrallment, as described by Herodian. It would, I think, be misleading to maintain that he depicts the soldiers' pleasure in contemplation of this boy as purely aesthetic. Are Herodian's soldiers to be credited with cool, objectified evaluation of artistic or natural beauty, involving suppression or sublimation of instinctual response? Are they, or their author, subject to attitudes, whether religious or cultural in origin, dictating refusal to acknowledge their pleasure in such contemplation as erotic? For it seems clear to me from this passage, taken together with those surrounding it, describing their response to his beauty, that such, according to Herodian, is the nature of the soldiers' pleasure in watching this lad.

It would of course be highly desirable, were it possible, to test against the evidence of coins and inscriptions not only the likelihood of this interpretation, but also that of certain more or less unambiguous propositions, extractable from Herodian's account. By "unambiguous" I do not mean here to say that such propositions contain no ambiguities or vaguenesses, but rather that, precisely by virtue of the very vaguenesses and ambiguities they do contain, which render them more general, less particular, they become epistemologically unambiguous: susceptible of being judged simply either to be true or false. These unambiguous propositions, extractable from Herodian's account of the conception of the *coup*, are: that the soldiers are already familiar with Varius, and come from their fort to watch him; that Varius performs sacred dances in the temple of Emesa, in his role as high priest of Elagabal; that he is beautiful, or perceived as such by at least some of the soldiers; that this plays an important role in the soldiers' attitude towards him; that the soldiers think of him as somehow imperial, royal, or princely; that Maesa's launching of the rumour of Varius' Caracallan paternity is somehow connected to the soldiers' previously existing admiration for the boy; and, that the promise of Maesa's money plays an important role in persuading the soldiers to support Varius' dynastic claim.

There is no extant or recorded independent, artefactual evidence, whether private or imperial, of the soldiers' familiarity with Varius, of their frequentation of the temple of Emesa, of their perceptions of his appearance or his social status, of any connection between those perceptions and the claim of his imperial paternity, or of the amount, and promised or actual deployment, of Maesa's wealth. The only evidence available from coins or inscriptions relevant to any of these propositions concerns, on the one hand, Varius' status as high priest of Elagabal, and, on the other, the question of his beauty, not, however, as perceived by the soldiers, but rather as perceptible by oneself.

His coins proclaim him *Invictus Sacerdos*: unvanquished priest;<sup>101</sup> his inscriptions *Summus* or *Amplissimus Sacerdos Dei Invicti Solis Elagabali*: high priest of the unvanquished sun god Elagabal.<sup>102</sup> They do so, of course, by virtue of their nature as imperial artefacts, only for a period after that here in question: before he is elevated to the principate. There is no such evidence for his tenure of that office

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<sup>101</sup> *Monnayage*, 252-263.

<sup>102</sup> *CIL* 3, LXXXIV; *CIL* 6, 37183; *CIL* 10, 5827, among others.

before his elevation.

Regarding Varius' alleged beauty, whilst keeping in mind not only the inherent subjectivity of any such characterisation, but also that Graeco-Roman antiquity has certain more or less objective canons for defining beauty, in terms of mathematical proportions, the so-called "golden mean," it must be said that the evidence of coins presents a mixed picture, with respect to his true likeness. The very earliest coins, presumably relevant here, minted in Antioch and Rome, and slightly later in Nicomedia, show a wide variety of features. This may be due to the absence, at least from Rome, of a model, in the form of an official bust, for the engravers, during the first few weeks, or even months, of Varius' reign. For he came to the throne in Syria, and took over a year to reach Rome.<sup>103</sup> As for the various busts, distributed among the musea of Europe and America, purporting to depict him, there is no agreement among glyptologists as to the correspondence of any one of them to its purported model.<sup>104</sup> So the first problem to be solved, before addressing the question of his beauty, is that of his likeness.

Of available images which may be said to be relevant to this particular enquiry, those on coins minted at Antioch, soon after Varius' elevation to the throne, are presumably the likeliest to correspond to his actual pre-imperial appearance. They show a profile which leads one to imagine a face-on view,<sup>105</sup> corresponding to a Semitic, rather than to a Greek or Roman boy, thus falling outside the scope of those canons. This, in turn, raises questions concerning the degree of Herodian's own observance of those canons, in characterising Varius as beautiful; for by "official" classical Graeco-Roman standards, any deviance from the canonical norm would be excluded from such characterisation, and the typical looks of any other than a Graeco-Roman face and body would be considered barbarous and ugly. Whether one finds the boy on these coins attractive oneself is, of course, entirely subjective, but not thereby irrelevant to consideration of the questions here under examination.

For in the absence of evidence from ancient artefacts, directly relevant to any of the propositions here in question, the only basis for assessing their likelihood will, just as before, in the case of the soldiers' motivations, according to Dio, for wishing to be rid of Macrinus, come down to one's own discernment, based on common sense. And just as, in that case, one's discernment is informed by one's observation of political and military history, in periods nearer to one's own experience, in this case it may be coloured by one's tastes, or, preferably, by one's capacity imaginatively to reconstruct those of the soldiers, whether those in Herodian's narrative, or those frequenting (if they did) the temple of Emesa, at the relevant time, specifically with respect to the question of their attitudes towards boyish beauty. For it cannot have eluded the reader of Herodian's text that, in all the mix of motives he adduces for the soldiers' eventual support of Varius, this is the element upon which he insists most frequently — three

103 Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Iter Principis: Elagabal's Journey from Emesa to Rome? Area Studies Tsukuba*, 21, 2003, (henceforth *Iter*) throughout.

104 To be discussed in *Glyptica Variana*, yet to be published.

105 To be reconstructed in yet a further part of these studies, *Imagines Varianae*, yet to be published.

times, in as many consecutive sentences — and which, of all those elements, is, in Herodian's world view, the most potent, especially if combined with ambition and greed, as a spur to action.

For the soldiers' attitude towards Varius, according to my reading of Herodian, is not merely the awe felt by a commoner towards a princely, royal, or imperial person, nor yet the devotion of a worshipper for a religious leader, though Varius may, in Herodian's account, properly be described as both, even at the time here in question, before his elevation to the principate. Herodian's repeated insistence on the soldiers' admiration of his beauty, particularly in the sentence, analysed above, which places their enjoyment in watching the boy in the context of their frequentation of his temple and worship of his god, suggests, however one interprets that sentence, that the sentiment which motivates the soldiers is neither purely dynastic nor religious; nor is it purely aesthetic, though it may contain elements of all of these. It is erotic.

This does not necessarily mean that we should interpret Herodian to suggest that any of the soldiers actually wish or seek to have sexual relations with Varius — though one's observation of human nature, both in literature, ancient and modern, and in reality, suggests that this is not implausible; while ancient historiography, for what it is worth, including subsequent passages in Herodian's treatment of Varius, suggests that such an intention might not be unwelcome to its object. Rather, it means that, in the underlying subtext of Herodian's narrative, suggested by his manifold ironies, ambiguities, and subtleties throughout this passage, the soldiers' attitude towards Varius is not shown as dictated by dynastic sentiments as such, whatever their reported fondness for Caracalla, serving to express their dislike of Macrinus. Neither is it depicted as deriving exclusively from *νοῦς*, force of reason, in the form of a cold calculation of Varius' possible role in furthering their perceived material self-interest; nor yet as inspired by *ἐνθουσιασμός*, enthusiasm, in its proper sense, if the god in question be identified as Elagabal. These may all form part of the mix of their motives, but they are underlain, if not overridden, by Eros, characterised, by Hesiod, whose texts formed a basic element in Greek education, as “*κάλλιστος ἐν ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι, fairest among the deathless gods, λυσιμελής, who unnerves the limbs, πάντων δὲ θεῶν πάντων τ' ἀνθρώπων δάμναται ἐν στήθεσσι νόον καὶ ἐπίφρονα*, and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all men and all gods within them.”<sup>106</sup>

If this reading of Herodian's text is correct, an interesting hypothesis arises. While it is impossible, on the basis of the evidence available, to know whether his account of these matters is factually true or not, one can see that it enjoys a certain verisimilitude: Herodian's soldiers' infatuation with Varius is not unlike that of many collectivities with individuals perceived as charismatic, as being what in modern parlance are called “stars.” Such individuals tend to generate a following, one which, in certain circumstances, whatever the original context of their “stardom,” may be translated into the political sphere. If this is so of Varius, whether in Herodian's account, or in reality, it follows that his rise to

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106 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 120-122.

power, in historiography or in reality, depends, not so much on an allegation, whether true or false, concerning his imperial paternity, but rather on some quality inherent in him, which, through an unlikely concatenation of events, involving that allegation, plus several other factors, leads to his elevation to the purple.

One relevant fact is available, allowing comment on the likelihood of this hypothesis, as opposed to its verisimilitude. The distance to Emesa from the legionary fort at Raphanea, where the *coup* is alleged to have begun, is some 25 Roman miles: a whole day on foot, or half a day on horseback.<sup>107</sup> Given the absence of a road between Raphanea and Emesa, one must ask, if the soldiers from this fort did indeed frequent the temple of Elagabal, what it was that drew them there. Given Roman military policy at this time usually to station legions outside their own provinces of origin, it is unlikely that these soldiers were themselves Syrians, let alone Emesenes. Indeed we know that Emesene soldiers were stationed in Pannonia, during the Severan period.<sup>108</sup> It is therefore unlikely that soldiers of III Gallica frequenting Emesa would have been, at least in origin, devotees of Elagabal. Herodian's ambiguity, discussed above, concerning their motives in frequenting that god's temple may reflect this fact. Since, moreover, there are other towns, including Arethusa and Epiphaneia, at a similar distance from Raphanea, though also unconnected by road, and yet another, Apamea, though farther, directly connected by road, they would seem to have had an ample choice of locales in which to enjoy their leaves. If they chose Emesa, why? The attraction of a charismatic individual offers a likely explanation.

To attribute his charisma to Eros, however, involves not only adopting a position with respect to the operation of gods in human affairs, but also choosing among gods. So long as gods are understood as the personification of certain human feelings and impulses, such as those arguably attributed, by Herodian, to the soldiers, Eros' intervention in this matter does not seem altogether unlikely. But it must be remembered that the only god, other than Elagabal, whom Herodian invokes by name in this passage is not Eros, but Dionysus, to whose youthful beauty that of Varius is compared. And, as for Varius himself, if he were to attribute his elevation to the purple to the work of any god, it would be to neither of these, but to that of his own priestly devotion: Elagabal.

### **The execution of the coup.**

Leaving for now these questions and consequences, deriving from my interpretation of Herodian's account of the motivations for the *coup*, let us proceed to consider Dio's and Herodian's accounts of its execution. The main differences between them, with respect to its early stages, concern the role of Eutychianus, already referred to above, and the presence or absence of the rest of Varius' family from the

<sup>107</sup> *Iter*, referring to the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, 2000, maps 67 & 68.

<sup>108</sup> Halsberghe, G. H., *Le culte de Deus Sol Invictus à Rome au 3e siècle après J.C.*, *ANRW*, 2.17.4, 1984, p. 2182, n. 6, citing *Année Épigraphique*, 1910, p. 442, no. 133, and p. 36, no. 141.



fort where he is proclaimed emperor.

According to Dio, Eutychianus, τοῦ τε γὰρ Ταραύτου υἱὸν αὐτὸν μοιχίδιον εἶναι πλασάμενος, καὶ τῇ ἐσθῆτι τῇ ἐκείνου, ἣ ποτὲ ἐν παισὶν ἐχρῆτο, κοσμήσας: “pretending that Varius was a natural son of Caracalla, dressing him in clothing which the latter had worn as a child,” ... ἔς τε τὸ στρατόπεδον νυκτός: “brought him to the camp at night,” μῆτε τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ μῆτε τῆς τήδης ἐπισταμένης, ἐσθήγαγε, καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας ἅμα τῇ ἑφ’ τῆς τοῦ Μαΐου ἐκαίδεκάτης, γλιχομένους τινὰ ἀφορμὴν ἐπαναστάσεως λαβεῖν, ἀνέπεισε νεοχμῶσαι: “without the knowledge of either his mother or his grandmother, and at dawn on the sixteenth of May persuaded the soldiers, who were eager to get an excuse for an uprising, to revolt.”

We have already dispensed with the leading role that Dio seems to assign to Eutychianus. The question of Eutychianus’ real identity, a subject of considerable confusion and controversy, has been addressed elsewhere in these studies,<sup>109</sup> with the conclusion that he is probably uniquely himself. He is not to be conflated with other members of Maesa’s household, instrumental in the execution of the *coup*: not, in particular, with a certain Gannys, allegedly her daughter Soaemias’ lover;<sup>110</sup> nor yet with one Comazon, a knight who emerges, in Dio’s narrative, as Maesa’s close counsellor, later holding the consulate together with Varius, and, unlike many others closely involved with his reign, surviving it into the next, there to thrive.<sup>111</sup> In contrast with Gannys and Comazon, both of whom figure in Dio’s narrative after the successful conclusion of the *coup*, Eutychianus is cited only in its early stages.

According to Herodian, νύκτωρ τε λάθρα τῆς πόλεως ὑπεξῆλθε σὺν ταῖς θυγατράσι καὶ τοῖς ἐγγόνοις, “quietly at night [Maesa] slipped out of the city with her daughters and their children,” and καταγαγόντων τε αὐτοὺς τῶν προσφυγόντων στρατιωτῶν γενόμενοι πρὸς τῷ τείχει τοῦ στρατοπέδου ῥᾶστα ὑπεδέχθησαν· εὐθὺς τε τὸν παῖδα πᾶν τὸ στρατόπεδον Ἀντωνῖνον προσηγόρευσαν, τῇ τε πορφυρᾷ χλαμύδι περιβαλόντες εἶχον ἔνδον: “guided by the soldiers who were under her protection, the party reached the camp walls and were received without the slightest trouble. Immediately the whole garrison saluted him as Antoninus, and, putting the imperial purple cloak on him, they kept him in the camp.” One may well wonder by what notion of protection the soldiers can be said to be under Maesa’s, rather than the reverse. Again, an alternative reading is possible. The genitive absolute participle construction καταγαγόντων τε αὐτοὺς τῶν προσφυγόντων στρατιωτῶν could be taken simply to mean “guided by the soldiers who were fleeing for refuge,” without linking that refuge to Maesa.

Whether Maesa and the rest of her family are present or not, the next series of steps in the *coup*, until the decisive battle which concludes it, do not seem to involve any of them, apart from Varius, in

109 *Riddle*, throughout.

110 *Dio*, 80.6.2. Contra: Kettenhofen, E., *Die syrischen Augustae in der historischen Überlieferung, Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Orientalisierung, Antiquitas*, 3, AVFGS, 24, 1979, p. 30-31.

111 Pflaum, *Carrières*, 2, 1960, §290, *P. Valerius Comazon*, p.752-756; Hanslik, R., *P. Valerius Comazon*, RE 7/14, 1948, col. 2412-2413.

either account. So the difference between Dio's and Herodian's, with respect to their presence or absence at the launching of the *coup*, seemingly important, in fact has no effect on subsequent developments.

In Dio's account, Julianus, Macrinus' praetorian prefect, who happens to be somewhere nearby, learns of the insurrection fairly quickly, and immediately slays a daughter and son-in-law of Gessius Marcianus, husband of Mamaea, sister of Soaemias. (It is not clear from the text whether these two victims stand in the same relationship to Mamaea herself.<sup>112</sup>) He then attacks the camp, with a contingent of Moorish soldiers who fight quite well for their countryman, Macrinus, managing to break down some of the gates. But Julianus, perhaps afraid to rush in, prefers to attempt negotiation. This fails to elicit any response, and gives the fort's defenders time to repair their defences. Not only that, but by parading Varius on the ramparts, and persuading the besiegers of his resemblance to Caracalla, the rebels manage to "corrupt" the soldiers under Julianus, who narrowly escapes when his troops turn on their commanders. The mastermind of this tactic, according to Dio, is Eutychianus, who, through an intermediary, sent out among the soldiers, promises them the rank and property of their commanders, if they will kill them and join the insurrection. This is the last we hear in Dio's text, or anywhere else, of Eutychianus. Meanwhile, Varius, on the ramparts, promises an amnesty to all who join him.

In Herodian's account, rather than Julianus happening to be nearby, and coming forthwith to the fort, time is given for news of the revolt to spread throughout the army, stationed in camps between Emesa and Antioch, and for it to reach Macrinus in the latter city. The reaction of the soldiers in these intervening camps to the news is, in many cases, to desert and join the rebels, thus providing Herodian with occasion to return to the question of their motivation in so doing. Here, in contrast with his subtle, ambiguous, and ironic account, discussed above, concerning the motivations of the soldiers stationed near Emesa, who have seen Varius in person, and fallen under his spell, Herodian clearly and unambiguously ascribes the conversion to his cause of these deserters, who have presumably never seen the boy, to hatred of Macrinus, and the lure of Maesa's money. Macrinus' reaction to the news is nonchalant: he sends Julianus to deal with the matter.

Herodian's account of Julianus' confrontation with the rebels differs from Dio's, in that Julianus does not survive it. Again this difference, seemingly important, has no practical effect, since even in Dio's account, as we shall see, Julianus does not survive for long. The same basic situation, that of the rebels displaying Varius on the ramparts, and entreating Julianus' troops to change sides, is described, with the differing, somewhat comical detail, that Herodian's rebels show their purses full of coins to the attackers, by way of inducement. Whereupon, οἱ δὲ πιστεύσαντες Ἀντωνίνου τε εἶναι τέκνον καὶ ὁμοιότατόν γε (βλέπειν γὰρ οὕτως ἤθελον) τοῦ μὲν Ἰουλιανοῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποτέμνουσι καὶ πέμπουσι τῷ Μακρίνῳ, αὐτοὶ δὲ πάντες ἀνοιχθῆσαι αὐτοῖς τῶν πυλῶν ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον ἐδέχθησαν: "as Macrinus' troops were convinced that the boy was the son of Antoninus" (Caracalla) "and even resembled him closely (since this was what they

112 Stein, A., *Gessius Marcianus*, RE 7/13, 1910, col.1328, item 6, lines 10-39, maintains that they did so.

wanted to see), they cut off Julianus' head and sent it back to Macrinus, while the gates of the camp were thrown open and the troops welcomed in."

Once again we find Herodian offering, and, moreover, with almost identical wording, a sceptical, or at least ambiguous view of his characters' motivation, as in the case, discussed above, of those wishing to see a rough picture of the sun in certain markings on the baetyl of Elagabal: εἰκόνα τε ἡλίου ἀνέργαστον εἶναι θέλουσιν, οὕτω βλέποντες. Clearly, these newly converted soldiers' professions of belief in Varius' claim to Caracallan paternity are not to be taken at face value. Here, indeed, the suggestion is far stronger, amounting to an indication, through a difference in nuance: βλέπειν γὰρ οὕτως ἤθελον. One thing is to see something a certain way, and to interpret what one sees according to one's wishes, another is to wish to see something a certain way, and therefore to see it thus. This is not a distinction without a difference. The force of wishing, affecting, in the case of these soldiers, their vision itself, rather than, as in that of the devotees of Elagabal, their interpretation of what they see, indicates an even more sceptical attitude, on the part of the narrator, towards the soldiers' professions of belief. This does not, however, necessarily imply their insincerity in that belief. As is possible in the case of Maesa, with respect to her claims on behalf of Varius, people do sometimes believe things they know, or suspect, to be false. But what is even more significant here, is that this occurs only to the soldiers who are exposed to Varius' presence. Those who have never seen him, in the immediately preceding passage, are unambiguously motivated by a perfectly rational hatred of Macrinus and cupidity for Maesa's money. Those who have seen Varius are subject to a strange enchantment, causing them to think and behave irrationally. Which, if any, of the gods, named or merely suggested by Herodian, is operating here, is a matter for speculation.

The MS of Dio's text, *Codex Vaticanus* 1288, at the locus corresponding to this juncture of events, is plagued with lacunae. A tentative reconstruction of this passage suggests that, in the period after Julianus' escape from his deserting soldiers at the fort, he, or possibly someone else, completes the work Julianus had begun before the siege, killing Marcianus, husband of Mamaea and father of Alexianus. Were this reading to be both accurate, with respect to Dio's text, and true, with respect to the event it would thus purport to describe, it might, together with the previous claim of Julianus' killing Marcianus' daughter and son-in-law, provide a clue, if they were also Mamaea's, to the virulence of her subsequent rivalry with her sister Soaemias. This culminates in her participation in the chain of events that leads to the murder of Soaemias and Varius, and to his substitution on the throne by Mamaea's son, Alexianus, renamed Severus Alexander. For Mamaea might well feel, particularly in view of her inclusion, and that of her son, in the claims made by Maesa, with respect to Caracalla's youthful dalliances in Rome, and their alleged results, that it is she, rather than her sister, who has sacrificed the most to her family's cause. Her son, therefore, rather than her nephew, should be its chief ostensible beneficiary. And she, in the natural course of events, should in time replace her mother as its real beneficiary. This is in fact what eventually occurs.

Another, more sinister speculation, based not on Dio's or Herodian's account (though dependent

on the latter's placement of the Severan women at the fort) but rather on one's own instinct to seek dastardly conspiracies, especially among the Severan women, might propose that Mamaea, safe inside the fort, has knowingly created the circumstances for her husband's death, perhaps by excluding him from foreknowledge of the uprising. This allows her to enjoy, like her sister Soaemias, whose husband, Varius, is dead some time before the *coup*, the liberty to claim adultery with Caracalla, without risk of contradiction. Since there is nothing other than historiographical allegation in support of Gessius Marcianus' existence, identity, and lifespan,<sup>113</sup> such speculation may be indulged in, so long as it is clearly identified as such, without fear of reproof from any source other than one's own, or another's, sense of historical restraint.

Dio's account now includes a series of events missing from Herodian's. According to Dio, Julianus, or whoever is the agent in the previous reconstructed passage, feeling he has reached the limits of his authority, sends for Macrinus. The emperor appears in Apamea, between Emesa and Antioch, the site of a major military garrison, and there designates his son, Diadumenianus, as co-Augustus with himself, in order, so Dio claims, ὅπως ἐπὶ τῇ προφάσει ταύτῃ τοὺς στρατιώτας τοῖς τε ἄλλοις καὶ πεντακισχιλίων δραχμῶν ὑποσχέσει τιθασεύσῃ: "to have an excuse for courting the favour of the soldiers in various ways, especially by the promise of [five thousand denarii]<sup>114</sup> apiece," the immediate disbursement of smaller donatives, and the rescinding of unpopular disciplinary measures. With the same excuse and purpose, but different means, he also feasts the populace. In the midst of the banquet, a soldier appears, carrying a bag, sealed with Julianus' ring, supposedly containing the head of Varius. The soldier disappears as the bag is opened, to reveal, instead, the head of Julianus, who has been found somewhere in hiding and slain. Macrinus, taking fright, returns immediately to Antioch, leaving the troops at Apamea, whom he has just bribed with the promise per soldier of something near a centurion's pay,<sup>115</sup> to turn against him, and join the rebellion.

In Dio's account, a period now intervenes between these events and the battle which will decide the outcome of the *coup*. During this period, each side is making preparations against the other, sending rival messengers to enlist support from potential allies. In such circumstances, being a messenger, or, as recipient of such a message, taking sides, or failing to do so, can be very dangerous. Thus Dio relates, by way of example, a series of events in Egypt, where Macrinus' appointees, having put to death Varius' messengers, are killed by the latter's supporters. While these events cannot be proven, at least there is evidence that the persons named by Dio were in Egypt under Macrinus.<sup>116</sup> Macrinus also writes to the senate in Rome, where, to judge by the diction and detail of his account, Dio happens himself to be present (albeit on the point of leaving, to take up his appointment, by Macrinus, as curator of Pergamon

113 Stein, A., & Petersen, L., *Gessius Marcianus*, *PIR*<sup>2</sup>, 4.1, 1952-1966, p.171; Stein, A., *Gessius Marcianus*, *RE* 6/13, 1910, col.1328, item 6, lines 10-39.

114 The Loeb translation gives the Roman accounting equivalent of twenty thousand sesterces.

115 The Roman Economy, Military Pay, <http://www.personal.kent.edu/~bkharvey/roman/sources/economy.htm>

116 Stein, A., *Die Präfecten von Ägypten*, 1950, p. 123, *Iulius Basilianus*, *Marius Secundus*.

and Smyrna, a post he will hold into, and perhaps throughout the reign of Varius). Never one to miss a chance to ridicule Macrinus, Dio pokes fun at his uncouth diction and fatuous self-presentation, while noting a portent of his doom: as his letter is read out, a pigeon alights on the statue of Severus (whose name Macrinus has applied to himself) inside the senate chamber. One knows what pigeons tend to do when they alight on statues.

Regarding the decisive battle fought between Macrinus' and Varius' forces, the question of its location, which differs in Dio's and Herodian's accounts, is discussed elsewhere in these studies.<sup>117</sup> I conclude that it is likely to have taken place somewhere along the road from Apamea to Antioch, probably not far south of a junction whose northeastern offshoot leads to a town called Imma, where another scholar has located this battle.<sup>118</sup> That being as it may, Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the battle itself broadly coincide, though differing in detail. Both agree that Macrinus could have won it, had he not taken flight before it was concluded.

According to Dio, Varius' rebels are led by Gannys, Soaemias' lover, a man without experience in military affairs, who has spent his life in luxury; despite which he shows some talent for tactics, and draws up his troops in good order. Macrinus' troops in both accounts are better men, better trained, and have the better of the battle, up to a certain point.

What turns the tide in Varius' favour, according to Dio, is the intervention of Maesa and Soaemias. Seeing their men begin to flee, they reportedly leap down from their chariots, restraining them from further flight with lamentations. Varius also intervenes: *σπασάμενον τὸ ξιφίδιον, ὃ παρεζωστο, ὥφθη σφίσιν ἐπὶ ἵππου θεία τινὶ φορῇ ὡς καὶ ἐς τοὺς ἐναντίους ἐλάσων*: "he was seen by his soldiers dashing along on horseback, with drawn sword, in a headlong rush that seemed divinely inspired." Even so, says Dio, Varius' men *καὶ ὡς δ' ἂν αὐτῶς ἐτράποντο, εἰ μὴ ὁ Μακρίνος ἰδὼν αὐτοὺς ἀνδισταμένους ἔφυγεν*: "would again have turned their backs, had not Macrinus fled when he saw them offering resistance."<sup>119</sup>

Maesa and Soaemias, present in Herodian's narrative at the initial uprising in the fort, are absent, as is Gannys (whom he never mentions) from his account of the battle. He ascribes the zeal of Varius' troops to their fear that if they lose they will be punished. Macrinus' men, on the other hand, fight with little energy. Some change sides to join Varius. Seeing this, Macrinus flees, shaving off his beard, and assuming the clothing of an ordinary traveller. But the battle rages on, after his departure, with his superior praetorians more than holding their own against the rebels, until they realise that their master has deserted them. Faced with this embarrassment, they quickly accede to Varius' offer of amnesty, and to take them on as his own guards.

<sup>117</sup> Iter, p. 12-15

<sup>118</sup> Honigmann, *Syria*, RE 2.4.8, 1932, col. 1686, l. 27-30.

<sup>119</sup> Dio, 79.29.4.

Dio tells us that Varius, writing to the senate to inform them of his elevation, assumes imperial titles without waiting for the senate to vote them to him.<sup>120</sup> An authority on the subject of Roman imperial successions is of the opinion that “though no sure mention survives of confirmatory decrees by the senate, these were presumably passed.”<sup>121</sup>

The tale of Macrinus’ flight and capture, and of his death, together with that of his son, Diadumenianus, at the hands of Varius’ agents, is again roughly similar in Dio’s and Herodian’s accounts. Intending to reach Rome, where he thinks he will be well received, Macrinus makes his way as far as Chalcedon, on the Sea of Marmara. There, according to Dio, he is betrayed by a false friend; whereas Herodian ascribes his capture to an adverse wind, which blows his ship back into the hands of his pursuers. Herodian has him decapitated on the spot, and Diadumenianus killed in an undisclosed location, while Dio makes Macrinus recross Anatolia as a prisoner, presumably in the direction of Antioch. Having learned along the way of his son’s capture and death at Zeugma, he is executed (according to Prosper Tiro)<sup>122</sup> at Archelaïs, in Cappadocia, where, according to Dio, his unburied body remains till Varius, on his way from Antioch to Rome, has a chance to gloat over it.

A subsequent part of these studies, dedicated to Varius’ *res gestae*, will consider his triumphant entry into Antioch, and the donative he gives his soldiers, drawn not from his own newly acquired imperial exchequer, nor even from Maesa’s purse, but from the melted-down gold and silver of the Antiochians, glad to pay this price to prevent their city being sacked.<sup>123</sup> It will also consider the measures undertaken in Varius’ name by his first set of ministers, Gannys and Comazon, during the first few months of his reign. What remains to be done here is to discuss the individual, joint, and relative likelihood of Dio’s and Herodian’s accounts of the execution of the *coup*, and to fulfill the promise to consider not only its immediate motivations, but also the question of its underlying causes. Between the execution of these two final duties, space will be found to take note of the version of these matters given by the *Historia Augusta*.

### **The likelihood of Dio’s and Herodian’s accounts of the execution of the coup.**

The methodological principles guiding our consideration of the various forms of likelihood pertaining to these two accounts are by now familiar to the reader. In the absence of direct material evidence, whether private or imperial, substantiating or refuting any particular assertion contained in historiography, one’s judgement of the likelihood of any proposition deriving from either of these two

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120 *Dio*, 80.2.2.

121 Hammond, M., *The Transmission of the Powers of the Roman Emperor from the Death of Nero in A.D. 68 to that of Alexander Severus in A.D. 235*, *MAAR*, 24, 1956, p. 63-133, esp. p. 120, text, & note 353.

122 *Prosperi Tironis epitoma chronicon*, ed. *Primum a CCCXXXIII continuata ad a. CCCCLV*, ed. Mommsen, 1892, §780.

123 *Dio*, 80.1.1.

accounts can only be based on common sense, enlightened by whatever general or specific knowledge (as opposed to belief) one has about the persons, period, place, and other circumstances relevant to this enquiry. Again, as in that of its several and varied motivations, here, in the case of the execution of the *coup*, there are no coins or inscriptions or papyri bearing directly on most of the questions pertinent here:

Did the *coup*, assuming it took place at all, begin with the proclamation of Varius by the soldiers in the legionary fort near Emesa? Which was the legion in question? Were his mother and grandmother, aunt and cousin, present or absent at this alleged proclamation? Were his aunt's daughter, son-in-law, and husband slain at this time? Did Julianus besiege the fort immediately, on his own authority, or only after being ordered to do so by Macrinus? Was he decapitated on the spot, or did he escape his mutinous soldiers, only to be hunted down later? Was his head really delivered by a rebel soldier to Macrinus at a banquet, celebrating Diadumenianus' elevation to the status of Augustus, held for the populace of Apamea? Which were the soldiers who deserted and joined the rebels, and which remained loyal to Macrinus? Were Maesa and Soaemias present at a battle between Macrinus' forces and those of Varius? Was he? Was the rebel general in that battle Gannys, Soaemias'lover? Did Maesa and Soaemias descend from their chariots and exhort their troops, thus turning the tide of battle? Did Varius charge into battle on his horse? At what precise juncture of events did Macrinus take flight?

For answers to most of these questions, we have no evidence at all. The only extant artefacts with even the remotest bearing on any of them are certain coins, and a number of inscriptions, containing information relating to the legions, which is indirectly relevant to those of the foregoing questions involving them.

Coins from Sidon, on the coast of Syria, with Varius' bust on their obverse, and, on their reverse, a vexillum with the legend *L III GAL*, while proving nothing so specific as protagonism in a *coup*, responsible for his elevation to the throne, do at least indicate some fairly close relationship between Varius and the third Gallican legion.<sup>124</sup> This legion has a long history, going back to the Roman republic. While inscriptions found in diverse parts of Syria allow us to affirm the presence there of soldiers from III Gallica, during the period relevant here, that of the Severan dynasty, they do not provide precise information as to the location of its camp. On the basis of a literary source, geographical rather than historiographical, this legion's winter quarters are supposed to have been situated at Raphanae, near Emesa.<sup>125</sup> On the basis of the conjunction of these heterogeneous bits of information, of diverse epistemological status, III Gallica is supposed to be the legion which initiates the *coup* of 971=218.<sup>126</sup> But we also know, from inscriptions dating from a period several months, or some years later, during or after the reign of Varius, that men of III Gallica were redistributed among other legions.<sup>127</sup>

124 Ritterling, *Legio*, *RE* 12/24, 1925: XXXIII, *leg. III Gallica*, col. 1517-1532, esp. col. 1527, lines 34-39.

125 *Ibid.*, col. 1525, lines 8-48, citing *Ptolemy*, 5.14.22.

126 *Ibid.*, col. 1525, line 65 – col. 1526, line 34.

127 *Ibid.*, col. 1526, line 35 – col. 1527, line 33.

This would seem to pose a puzzle: why, if III Gallica initially proclaimed Varius emperor, would its men be sent to other legions? Surely, it would be kept intact, and granted favoured treatment, as suggested, though not proven, by the cited coins of Sidon. Again, as in previous cases, we must turn to ancient historiography for explanation, which, however plausible or likely, cannot, alas, be confirmed as fact. Dio tells us that, in the course of Varius' reign, the soldiers of this legion, having learnt how to launch a *coup d'état*, soon become restless again, especially in view of Varius' egregious behaviour, and decide to repeat the experience, this time placing one of their own on the throne. Indeed, quelled once, they try yet again.<sup>128</sup> Finally, it may be inferred, they are disbanded, and those of their men who are not executed are distributed among other legions, as the epigraphic record suggests. Why, then, may we not affirm this likely explanation as fact? Because there could just be another reason, such as plague, for this legion's demise as a viable unit. Dio's allegation, standing, in any case, at one or more removes from direct witness, does not constitute fact. Nor, for that matter, would a claim of direct witness, at least not one made by Dio. Again, we lack the decree disbanding this legion.

The other legion relevant here is the second Parthian, a new legion, founded by Severus, and stationed at this time, according to Dio, at Apamea, where Macrinus allegedly goes to seek its support.<sup>129</sup> Dio does not cite this legion by its proper name and number, but by its nickname, οἱ Ἀλβανιοί: "the Albans," derived from its permanent headquarters at Alba, near Rome. According to a supposedly authoritative secondary source, Pauly's *Real Encyclopaedie*, cited here as such in other contexts, Dio is the primary source for the claim that the Albans accompany Varius on his journey from Syria to Rome.<sup>130</sup> My reading of the relevant passage in Dio's text fails to confirm this particular. In the context of discussing Varius' letter to the senate, at the outset of his reign, Dio mentions the presence in Rome of soldiers of the Alban legion, but does not allude to their escorting Varius on his journey, which, at that stage of Dio's text, is yet to be undertaken. That being as it may, it is in Rome, rather than in Syria, that epigraphic evidence, linking this legion to Varius, in the form of an altar, dated to 973=220, dedicated to his *Victoria aeterna*, is to be found.<sup>131</sup> Again, on its basis, one may affirm the existence of a close relationship between this emperor and this legion, but not thereby confirm Dio's account of this legion's auxiliary role in the *coup*.

That is all that can be said, on the basis of evidence, concerning the question of which soldiers proclaimed and supported Varius. As for the rest of the questions concerning the execution of the *coup*, common sense, all that one is left with whereby to judge them, provides no basis for choosing between Dio's account or Herodian's. Both versions are plausible, and neither seems more likely than the other. The only outright contradictions between them concern the presence at the fort, or absence therefrom, of

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128 *Dio*, 80.7.1; 80.7.3.

129 Ritterling, *Legio*, *RE* 12/24, 1925: XXVIII, *leg. II Parthica*, col. 1476-1483, esp. col. 1479, line 54, citing *Dio*, [79].34.2.

130 *Ibid.*, col. 1480, lines 8-9, citing *Dio*, [80].2.3.

131 *Ibid.*, col. 1477, line 17, citing *CIL* 6.3401 = 14.2255.



the Severan women and their children other than Varius, and the timing and place of Julianus' execution. Neither of these discrepancies has any discernible effect on the outcome of the course of action undertaken. Otherwise, Dio's and Herodian's accounts of the *coup's* execution are, like their respective accounts of its motivation, complementary.

### The account of the *Historia Augusta*

Before considering, in conclusion, the question of the underlying causes of the succession here in question, let us briefly glance at its echoes in late antique historiography. The only text which does more than merely record its occurrence, as do several chronicles and digests,<sup>132</sup> is the *Historia Augusta*, whose *Opilius Macrinus* contains a very condensed account, seemingly following Herodian, rather than Dio.<sup>133</sup> It mentions, as a motive for the soldiers' revolt against Macrinus, his giving himself over to a life of luxury. Thereupon, it introduces Maesa with a similar rhetorical formula, *fuit aliqua mulier Maesa sive Varia ex Emesena urbe*: "now there was a certain woman of Emesa", misnaming her Varia, while calling her grandson Heliogabalus, citing his alleged beauty, and its impact on the soldiers who frequent the temple at Emesa, whereof he is priest. Omitting Eutychianus altogether, it ascribes to Maesa the declaration to the soldiers of Varius' alleged Caracallan paternity, which the *HA* seems at times to accept, at others to deny,<sup>134</sup> and brings Maesa, together with Varius, into the legionary camp. It has Macrinus order Julianus to attack the fort, where his soldiers succumb to *miro amore*: "wonderful affection" at the sight of Varius, and, killing Julianus, join the rebel ranks. Macrinus loses the decisive battle on account of *proditione militum eius et amore Antonini*: "the soldiers' treachery to him and their love for [Varius]," but escapes, together with his son, only to be caught and decapitated in a village in Bithynia.

The fact that the *HA* follows Herodian, rather than Dio, in this account, is significant for study of the posthumous evolution of the Varian myth or legend in antiquity, and for its subsequent metamorphoses from the Renaissance into modern times. In particular, by virtue of this choice, if choice it be, on the part of the author of the *HA* (which, because written in Latin, rather than Greek, is the text which plays the greatest part in shaping that legend or myth in post-antique times), the role of eros, both in bringing Varius to the throne, which is absent from Dio's account, and in leading to his downfall, which is present both in Dio's and Herodian's, becomes firmly established. Indeed in the *HA* it becomes, together with extravagance and cruelty, the dominant theme.

### The succession of 971=218 in the larger context of Roman history.

Looking beyond the question, which cannot be answered on the basis of the evidence available, of

<sup>132</sup> See the list of relevant ancient historiography in the *Appendix*.

<sup>133</sup> *HA/OM*, 8.4-10.6.

<sup>134</sup> See the discussion of this matter in *QV2*.

whether Dio's or Herodian's account of this succession, or any part of either, or coincidence of both, is true or not, one may consider the bare fact of its occurrence, which is incontrovertible, and pause to wonder that it took place at all. For the first recorded accession to the principate of a pre-pubescent boy, one, moreover, for whose pre-imperial identity there is no direct artefactual evidence whatever, surely ranks as a major enigma in Roman history. For this question, at least, ancient historiography does offer direct factual evidence. For Dio's indignation at the fact of this succession, his characterisation of its manner of accomplishment as fraudulent, and his abysmal opinion of the moral character of its ostensible protagonist, show that it was felt by some, at least, of its contemporary observers not to be a regular and unremarkable event. How could such an unlikely and inappropriate succession, filling the office of the principate with a mere boy, one, moreover, who must either, if his story be believed, be a bastard, or if not, a fraud, ever have been suffered to take place?

To begin to answer that question, one must try to understand a paradox. On the one hand, we note the extreme instability attending the succession to the principate, implied by this succession. On the other, we observe the considerable stability and continuity of the institution of the empire, whether viewed as a social, economic, or political entity, permitting it to survive, relatively unscathed, at least at the lower administrative levels, even the least qualified of emperors. One might imagine that a state where such a succession as that of 971=218 could take place must quickly succumb to a general collapse of the rule of law, leading directly to anarchy, penury, and disintegration. This, indeed, did eventually happen, but it took some two centuries, by certain reckonings, nearer three, by others, after these events, to be accomplished. The contrast, at the time of Varius, between the principate's instability and the empire's stability invites one to re-examine, and perhaps to redefine, the relationship between these two entities.

Likewise, the search for answers to the question of how this succession could ever have been suffered to take place leads one to consider whether any known concept of cause and effect has a place in such an answer. An everyday, commonsense version of such a concept is defined above: "Cause is a set of conditions, preceding an event that has already occurred, given whose presence one believes that event was likely or certain to occur, and without whose presence one believes that event would not have occurred." Both parts of this definition must be satisfied, if one is to speak of cause and effect, for unless the two propositions are linked, one is dealing merely with occasion and consequence, not with cause and effect.

Both Dio and Herodian describe a set of conditions, preceding the *coup*, given whose presence they suppose it was likely or certain to occur, thus conforming to the first part of this definition. Locating their narration at a point in past time when the relevant events are about to take place, they both think it likely, indeed inevitable, given the soldiers' discontent, that something will provide them with an excuse to revolt. Moreover, given Macrinus' personal shortcomings, they also suggest that he is unlikely, whatever that excuse turns out to be, to quell such a revolt. Whether Dio and Herodian also assume

that this set of conditions caused the *coup*, in the sense that without them it would not have occurred, is more questionable. They do not consider what Macrinus' fate might have been, had he refrained from attempting to impose on the soldiers economies and discipline, or from indulging his fondness for dancing and mime-shows. Dio does indeed speculate that had Macrinus reached Rome, after his defeat in Syria, he πάντως ἂν τι κατείργαστο: "would certainly have accomplished something."<sup>135</sup> But this is very different from the hypothetical analysis of negatives, relating to his original policies, leading to the revolt against him, required to satisfy the second half of this definition. Dio's and Herodian's notion of cause and effect is synthetic and predictive, albeit viewed from the past, with benefit of hindsight, rather than analytical.

In other words, Dio and Herodian do not adopt a mechanistic or deterministic view of cause and effect, let alone one based on a concept of historical inevitability. Nor should we. Given the state of our knowledge, we can speak only of likely causes and effects. For we know that the soldiers' discontent with Macrinus need not necessarily have led to his succession by Varius. Can we also say that Varius would not have come to the throne had not the soldiers been discontented with Macrinus? If, as seems to be the case, we cannot affirm this negation, then can we really speak, in any other than an everyday, commonplace sense, of cause and effect?

Without presuming here to attempt to enter any further into that question, which is so large as to require a discussion as long as, or longer than this, and would take one well beyond the scope of the present investigation, I should like to point to where I think to be a likely place to begin seeking answers to that other, more limited question, which prompted this consideration: how could such a succession as this ever have been suffered to take place at all?

Clues to understanding the succession of 971=218 lie in the events of 946=193, as well as in their origins and sequel. The designation as his heir by Marcus Aurelius, the last "good" emperor, of his biological son, Commodus, in violation of long-standing Roman precedent, which favours adoptive successions, leads to a reign of terror, culminating in the eclipse of the Antonine dynasty. The strangulation of Commodus, the last true Antonine, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December of 945=192, followed by the murder of his senatorially chosen successor, Pertinax, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 946=193, at the hands of a group of disgruntled praetorians, leads to the auction, by the praetorians, of the principate, to the highest bidder, Didius Julianus, a very rich senator. He rules till he is executed on the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> of June of that same year, by order of the senate, while Septimius Severus, at the head of the legions of Pannonia, under his command, approaches Rome.<sup>136</sup> This extraordinary sequence of events culminates in the senate's forced invitation to Severus to assume the principate. It is followed, after a lengthy civil war against

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<sup>135</sup> *Dio*, 79.39.4

<sup>136</sup> Birley, A.R., *The Coups d'État of the Year 193*, *BJ*, 169, 1969, p.247-252, argues, on prosopographical grounds, for the involvement, or at least foreknowledge, of both Pertinax and Severus in or of the murder of Commodus.

his rivals, Niger and Albinus, by Severus' institution of a questionable dynastic succession, purporting, merely on the basis of his will, upheld by force of arms, to continue that of the Antonines. In the course of time, the elder of his sons, Caracalla, murders the younger, Geta, and himself succumbs to the treachery of his praetorian prefect, Macrinus.

This story contains all the elements necessary to provide a precedent for those of the succession of 971=218, as well as that of 975=222, and beyond. The murder of Pertinax shows the praetorians how easy it is to make and break emperors at will. Their auction of the principate foreshadows the alleged role of Maesa's money in the succession of 971=218. The rivalry of Caracalla and Geta prefigures that of Soaemias and Mamaea, worked out, in the latter case, through their respective sons, culminating in the murder of Varius, in 975=222, and in his succession by his cousin, Alexianus, as Severus Alexander. The opportunistic debasement of the dynastic model of succession accounts for its shallow claim on the soldiers' affections, especially visible in and after the fall of the Severans, with the murder of Alexander in 988=235. If patterns and precedents count for anything in the gestation and unfolding of events, independently of theories of cause and effect, they are already present in 946=193, ready to be copied and developed by the agents of the succession of 971=218, and of that of 975=222, as well as of all those that follow for the next half-century of ceaseless military *coups d'état*, until the principate is taken in hand, and some semblance of order is restored, by Aurelian.

### Concluding summary.

In conclusion, let us summarise what we have learnt about the succession of 971=218:

That an imperial succession occurred, at this time, involving these persons, in these specific roles, and with this particular outcome, is a fact.

That this succession resulted from a sudden and violent revolution in the state, of whatever magnitude and scope, is a likelihood of the highest degree.

That this succession took place in Syria is also highly likely, given certain previous and subsequent circumstances, concerning the movements of the persons involved, indicated by the evidence of coins and inscriptions.

That this succession took the particular form, with the particular actors, performing the particular actions, in the particular order and places, and for the particular reasons, alleged either by Dio or Herodian, is possible, for neither of their accounts commits anachronism, contradicts established historical fact, or even seems implausible, with regard to what is known about previous and subsequent Roman history, or concerning the permanent features of human nature.

Within the realm of possibility, inhabited by Dio's and Herodian's accounts, some propositions deducible from each appear more or less likely than others. Yet unless a proposition is corroborated, not by the coincidence of one account with the other, but rather by the evidence of coins or inscriptions, or of other archaeological remains, it cannot be said to be a fact. Since this circumstance does not apply to most of the main propositions advanced by either, with respect to the details of the motivation and execution of the *coup d'état* which they both claim to constitute the particular form of this succession, there is no basis other than common sense, with reference to general knowledge, or to a body of belief, that one may have acquired concerning Roman imperial antiquity, as well as to one's own experience and imagination, on which to choose between them.

That said, a few details from each account may be singled out as facts, or as very likely hypotheses, on the basis of coincidence with the evidence of ancient artefacts:

From Dio: that Macrinus refrained from murdering Maesa and her family; that Basilianus and Secundus were involved, under Macrinus, with Egypt; that the Legions III Gallica and II Parthica stood in some particular relationship to Varius. All these are facts.

From Herodian: that if the soldiers of the legionary fort at Raphanea visited Emesa during the period in question (970-971=217-218), given the distance and the lack of a road, they must have had some particular motive. This is a likely hypothesis. That this motive was their attraction to Varius is merely a possibility.

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ANRW = *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*

AVFGS = *Abhandlungen zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte, zur klassischen und provinzial-römischen Archäologie, und zur Geschichte des Altertums*

BHAC = *Bonner Historia Augusta Colloquium*

BHAF = *Bonner Historia Augusta Forschungen*

BJ = *Bonner Jahrbücher des Rheinischen Landesmuseums in Bonn (im Landschaftsverband Rheinland) und des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande*

BMCRE = *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*

BNF, Élagabale = *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Catalogue du Cabinet de Médailles, Élagabale*.

Carrières = Pflaum, H.G., *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres Sous le Haut-Empire Romain*, 1960.

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

Cohen<sup>2</sup> = Cohen, Henry, *Description Historique des Monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain, communément appelées Médailles Impériales*, 2nd edition, 1880-1884.

Dio = *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, ed. Boissevain, Weidmann, 1901; ed. & English translation by Cary, Loeb, 1969.

EPRO = *Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain*

Forum Ancient Coins =  
<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php>

HA = *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, ed. Hohl, Samberger & Seyfarth, 1971; ed. & English translation by Magie, Loeb, 1980.

HA/AH = *Vita Antonini Heliogabali*;

HA/SA = *Vita Severi Alexandri*;

HA/OM = *Vita Opellii Macrini*;

HA/Car = *Vita Caracallae*.

HABES = *Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge und Epigraphische Studien*

Herodian = *Herodiani Historiarum Ab Excessu Divi Marci Libri Octo*, ed. Stavenhagen, Teubner, 1922; ed. & English translation by Whittaker, Loeb, 1970.

ILS = *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*

Iter = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Iter Principis: Elagabal's Journey from Emesa to Rome?* *Area Studies Tsukuba*, 21, 2003.

Klio = *Klio, Beiträge zur alten Geschichte*

Lond. Pap. = *Papyrus Londinensis*

Monnayage = Thirion, Marcel, *Le Monnayage d'Élagabal, (218-222)*, 1968.

NDF/AAG = *Neue deutsche Forschungen, Abteilung Alte Geschichte*

OCD = *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1996.

MAAR = *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*.

Pap. Leipz. = *Papyrus Lipsianus*

PIR<sup>1</sup> = *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, first edition.

PIR<sup>2</sup> = *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, second edition.

QV1 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature, a Basis for Studia Variana*, part I: *The Boy on the Coin*, *Area Studies Tsukuba*, 22, 2004.

QV2 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature, a Basis for Studia Variana*, part II: *Nomen Varianum*, *Area Studies Tsukuba*, 23, 2004.

RE = *Real Enzyklopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*

REA = *Revue des Études Anciennes, Annales de la Faculté des Lettres de Bordeaux*.

RIC = *The Roman Imperial Coinage*

Riddle = Arrizabalaga y Prado, Leonardo de, *Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, 1999, p. 117-141

RNE = Millar, F., *The Roman Near East, 31BC-AD 337*, 1993.

SCD = Millar, F., *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964.

Victor = Aurelius Victor, Sextus, *Liber de Caesaribus*, Pichlmayr & Gruendel, 1970.

ZPE = *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*